



Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary



A sea star rests in a kelp forest. Photo: Nick Zachar/NOAA

Year One and Moving Forward

February 2026



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Introduction

The Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary (NMS) office approaches its commitments from a philosophy of leadership through service. To the Chumash Heritage NMS team, this means coming to discussions with humility and gratitude; and recognizing that Chumash governments and Peoples are sharing a responsibility to care for these waters with them. It also means holding an appreciation and understanding that Indigenous Peoples, commercial and recreational fishers, educators, researchers, businesses, visitors, and others all want to support the health of the ecosystems they are a part of.

The following is an overview of 1) Chumash Heritage NMS work since designation and 2) focus areas moving into the future to support building foundational sanctuary programming and relationships. This work has concentrated on education and outreach, operations and administration, resource protection, research and monitoring, and working closely with Indigenous governments, organizations, and communities.

Efforts in those spaces align strongly with the following action plans: Indigenous Cultural Heritage, Education and Outreach, Operations and Administration, Resource Protection, and Research and Monitoring. Centering work in the aforementioned spaces is critical for creating a strong foundation for the sanctuary to move forward. It does not diminish the importance of other action plans. Rather, establishing this foundation builds capacity and space to address all action plans to the best ability possible.

Establishing a new sanctuary takes time. The management plan was created to be a 5-10 year plan. While all action plans are important and interconnected, there are some action plans that require a starting priority while others may take more time to get to.

The following sections provide an overview of the past year's accomplishments for focus areas within Chumash Heritage NMS. For reference, a brief summary of the action plans associated with these focus areas is provided.

For more information about individual action plans, please refer to the **Management Plan**, which can be found by visiting [*Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary Final Management Plan*](#).

Indigenous Cultural Heritage Action Plan

Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary is rooted in collaborative co-stewardship. Throughout the designation, NOAA was informed and inspired by many meetings and conversations with local Indigenous governments, Tribes, and organizations. A collaborative co-stewardship approach requires deliberate intention throughout all the work of the sanctuary team.

Year in Review:

- **Collaborating on governance structures.** Working with the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians and the state of California in the development of the Sanctuary Advisory Council and beginning steps to establish the Intergovernmental Policy Council.
- **Centering Chumash Tribally-led work.** Working closely with Chumash Tribes to support work that they would like to take the lead on, such as language, interpretation, and research/monitoring.
- **Understanding community concerns.** Connecting with Chumash Tribes and organizations to understand their concerns, thoughts, and ideas related to activities occurring within the sanctuary, such as research activities.
- **Co-developing project proposals.** Working with Chumash Tribes to co-develop project proposals that further advance an understanding of the marine and coastal environment while bringing their voices and knowledge to the forefront.

Looking Ahead (next 3–5 years):

- Supporting the development of a Research Activities Panel with Indigenous leadership and a focus on building a foundation to support multi-knowledge and holistic-based approaches.
- Exploring the development of biocultural indicators with Indigenous Peoples to further our collective understandings of ecosystem health.
- Many additional actions are embedded within the work of sections below.

How you can support sanctuary action plans:

Below are a few overarching suggestions, though this list is not exhaustive.

- Take responsibility to learn about Chumash Peoples, governments, and institutions.
- Many Indigenous governments hold their own laws, rules, customs, and protocols; take time to become aware of these.
- Practice “nothing about us, without us” when working with Indigenous Peoples.
- Work to understand Free, Prior, and Informed Consent from the perspective of the Chumash government and Peoples that you may work with.
- Take steps to ensure that Tribes/Nations have adequate avenues for meaningful engagement. Work directly with Chumash governments to gain an understanding of how they would like to be engaged.

More information about collaborative co-stewardship approaches can be found in the sanctuary management plan here: <https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/chumash-heritage/management/>.

Education and Outreach

Our approach to education and outreach and communications is shaped by the understanding that successful management depends on public awareness, understanding, and support. An important responsibility of the sanctuary team is to get out into the community to share the story of Chumash Heritage NMS, to share information about the marine environment and management actions, and to enhance public engagement with and stewardship of our ocean and coastal environments. This work is informed by the Education and Outreach Action Plan of the Chumash Heritage NMS Management Plan.

Chumash Heritage NMS respects the history and deep cultural significance of this coastline to Chumash Peoples. A key understanding of the Chumash Heritage NMS team is that Chumash Peoples will decide what, how, and when to share their knowledge and culture, with their own voices. With this in mind, the sanctuary will work closely with Chumash governments to develop communication and outreach materials. The sanctuary team will continually build and strengthen relationships with knowledge holders, formal and informal educators, and other organizations to create an informed, aware, and engaged community.

Year in Review:

Over the last year, a large focus has been on raising public awareness of Chumash Heritage NMS, and what it means to have a national marine sanctuary in your backyard. The work has involved:

- **Outreach events.** Hosting and participating in **17 outreach events reaching 1,665 people** in the first year of designation. Notable events include our inaugural "Get Into Your Sanctuary" event and beach cleanup, joining Camp Kalawasaq for an afternoon of art and sharing, and participating in both Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Earth Day events, along with many other public events.
- **Developing and sharing resources.** Creating and developing outreach materials and resources that communicate fundamental sanctuary information such as: Why Chumash Heritage NMS is a special place, boundary and regulatory information, etc.
- **Partnerships and Relationships.** Expanding our communication network, **forging new partnerships**, and establishing **critical relationships** to facilitate the co-development of signage and other interpretive materials.
- **Supporting the next generation.** Mentoring 10 interns and fellows who assisted in developing key sanctuary materials.

Looking Ahead (next 3–5 years):

While outreach will remain important, there will be a greater focus on the following activities:

- **Co-developing with Indigenous governments** and others 12 sanctuary signs, a sanctuary poster, and interpretive materials, as well as supporting partner-led projects.
- Developing a robust portfolio of a variety of **outreach materials** to engage with the communities across multiple platforms, formats, and communication styles. For example, developing short write-ups about specific aspects of the ecosystem, like seamounts.

- Continuing to **explore and build partnerships**, facilitating the spread of sanctuary information, and developing strategies to meet community needs.
- Drafting a **volunteer program outline** and looking into potential approaches to share information with the community.
- Continuing to **mentor and support the next generation** of marine scientists and ocean professionals through fellowships, internships, volunteer opportunities, and project guidance.

How you can get involved in supporting sanctuary action plans:

- Reach out to your local educational institutions to inform them of the sanctuary and provide them with links to the [NOAA sanctuaries educational resources](#).
- Help us identify what environmental education programs already exist in the region and send the information to elizabeth.hofius@noaa.gov.
- Provide and distribute sanctuary materials and information within your networks.

Operations and Administration

One of the priorities in building the foundation of the new sanctuary is to establish the Sanctuary Advisory Council. The council is a critical component of ensuring that the community's voices are heard and represented in the management of the sanctuary. The Sanctuary Advisory Council will play an important role in helping staff understand what programs and information the community desires as well as distributing information to keep the community informed. In addition, building a new sanctuary includes many of the fundamental administrative tasks such as securing and furnishing an office space. Underpinning this work is the team's core philosophy of leadership through service. This work is informed by the Operations and Administration Action Plan.

Year in Review:

- **Establishing the Sanctuary Advisory Council.** Recruiting the first members, forming the council, developing its charter, and facilitating the first meetings.
- **Supporting the Sanctuary Advisory Council.** Providing support, facilitation, and resources for the council's initial decision making steps, such as voting in an Executive Committee election and proposing the establishment of a Research Activities Panel.
- **Establishing an office.** Furnishing and staffing a new office space, including procuring office supplies, furniture, and electronic equipment necessary for staff to work.
- **Expanding the team.** To increase capacity, funding was secured to bring on two term-limited positions.
- **Volunteer program framework.** Drafting a framework for a volunteer orientation program that will support sanctuary outreach and programmatic work.

Looking Ahead (next 3–5 years):

- **Supporting the Sanctuary Advisory Council.** Providing support to the Sanctuary Advisory Council in establishing meeting protocols, tackling administration and planning tasks, identifying priorities, and considering establishing working groups such as the

Indigenous People's Activities Panel and the Research Activities Panel.

- **Enhancing visibility and presence.** Reviewing infrastructure and operations requirements to support developing a strategic plan for increasing NOAA presence and best supporting the communities adjacent to the sanctuary.
- Conducting a **field operations needs assessment** to understand sanctuary requirements for research vessels, research equipment, diving, staffing, and maintenance.
- Partnering with non-profit groups and organizations to **explore additional funding sources** in support of the sanctuary's mission and exploring Joint Project Authority agreements and memorandums of understanding.
- Developing a unique **volunteer and communications** program focused on supporting outreach and knowledge sharing about the sanctuary.
- Expanding the **internship and fellowship programs** for the sanctuary to support research and programs, and to help guide the next generation of ocean professionals.

How you can get involved in supporting sanctuary action plans:

- Spreading and sharing information about the sanctuary with your communities and networks to increase community awareness.
- Sharing [NOAA student opportunities](#) with your local educational institutions.
- Developing Sanctuary Advisory Council meeting protocols and spreading awareness in your community of the Sanctuary Advisory Council.

Resource Protection

The goal of the Resource Protection (R/P) department is to facilitate and coordinate stewardship efforts that the sanctuary community cares about—defining what that role looks like alongside (*not in front of*) those we work with, including governments (Chumash Tribes and the state of California), communities, and federal agencies. Meanwhile this department will work to ensure multiple knowledge systems guide and inform these decisions and that Chumash Heritage NMS supports programs and initiatives that are complementary to other ongoing efforts. Our team is committed to carrying out mandated governmental duties with integrity, and will actively seek input on how we can improve transparency, communication, and consideration of community concerns.

R/P is a core responsibility of national marine sanctuaries, as mandated by the [National Marine Sanctuaries Act \(NMSA\)](#). Broad in scope, R/P utilizes regulatory tools alongside and in combination with non-regulatory management actions to safeguard the sanctuary and promote sustainable use and human-ocean relationships. Regulatory tools include [site-specific regulations](#) (limit or restrict certain activities), issuing permits (allowing certain activities to occur in a way that minimizes harm), and enforcement actions. Non-regulatory management activities are outlined in the [management plan](#), and encourage community participation, foster stewardship, and may focus on particular issues, such as marine debris.

Under the NMSA, “resources” encompass all living and non-living parts of the marine environment that make the sanctuary unique. This includes plants, animals, water, seabed, shipwrecks, and cultural histories. Regardless of whether someone chooses words like elements, features, or more relational terms like kinship in reference to these things, respectfully caring for the marine environment (of which people are part) remains a shared priority.

Year in Review:

A primary focus this past year was establishing systems, processes, and relationships that enable us to carry out our fundamental governmental duties. Highlights include:

- **Developing a permitting system.** A major priority was addressing activities that pre-dated sanctuary designation. We used a certification process to "grandfather in" pre-existing permits and rights for those activities already going on, such as research, restoration, and offshore infrastructure.
- **Connecting with agency partners.** We identified and established relationships with key agencies Chumash Heritage NMS would work with on emergency response (e.g., oil spills, vessel incidents), enforcement, and permitting, such as the U.S. Coast Guard, California Department of Fish & Wildlife, and NOAA Fisheries.
- **Location-based information.** We gathered spatial information on sanctuary features, such as habitats, geology, and jurisdictions, and developed online visualization tools to inform protection strategies.

Looking Ahead (next 3–5 years):

While all of the work shared above will continue to be a responsibility, we will also place a focus on the following activities:

- **Collaboration** with Indigenous partners on a sanctuary **interpretive/naturalist guide**, highlighting key aspects of the ecosystem.
- **Exploring non-regulatory management** activities, programs, and initiatives that address **water quality** and **wildlife disturbance** (e.g., whale entanglement) together with the governments and communities in the sanctuary region, continuing to build upon this year's efforts.
- **Building a foundation** to support this work, such as developing **inclusive planning processes** and gaining a holistic understanding of current issues and efforts. This will take time to set up and get going.

How you can support sanctuary action plans:

- Help us identify what stewardship programs and efforts already exist in the region, such as those addressing water quality or wildlife disturbance, and send the information to kirsten.white@noaa.gov.
- Let us know about any new, planned, or proposed projects or activities that could impact the sanctuary, and please share that information with kirsten.white@noaa.gov.
- Share with us your concerns and thoughts on permitting and activities occurring within the sanctuary.

- Within your networks, help spread awareness of where the sanctuary is located and about the special legal protections that the designation affords (see a [summary of prohibited activities](#)).

Research and Monitoring

The sanctuary is working to play a role in coordination and facilitation across research and monitoring, recognizing that research and monitoring is a collective effort. This work starts with establishing a foundation for a multi-knowledge-based approach to provide a holistic and robust evidence-based view of the ecosystem. We prioritize understanding past and current work to identify gaps, rather than duplicating existing efforts. By taking the time to synthesize and understand existing data and building relationships, we ensure that we are not simply collecting data for data's sake, but are co-creating a research program that is focused on community needs and priorities.

Year in Review:

- **Relationship Building.** We prioritized building relationships with the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, Chumash governments, Chumash organizations and non-profit organizations, academic institutions, scientists, researchers, and community members to integrate their concerns and priorities into our work.
- **Knowledge Exchange and Outreach.** We hosted our first set of community boat days. These events focused on strengthening relationships, demonstrating the application of Western scientific tools in research, and fostering discussions about caring for and understanding these ecosystems.
- **Multi-Knowledge Based Approach and Decision-Making.** Efforts are underway to establish the foundational framework that will support a multi-knowledge based approach and evidence-based decision-making. This relies on working meaningfully with Chumash governments. A significant focus this year has also been on applying for funding to support this work.
- **Research and Baseline Monitoring.** We are actively identifying and connecting with research and monitoring programs to enhance our understanding of baseline conditions within the sanctuary, specifically related to biodiversity, ocean conditions, and the seafloor.
 - University of California Santa Barbara graduate students are creating the sanctuary's first public baseline assessment (anticipated to be released summer 2026), having already processed thousands of data points.
 - Interns started our first internal species database and mapped blue carbon habitats using existing satellite data within the sanctuary.

Looking Ahead (next 1–5 years):

A primary focus this past year was establishing systems and processes, and building relationships that enable us to begin building this program. While there is great excitement to start field monitoring immediately, we are intentionally focusing this initial phase on understanding already existing data and building the relationships necessary to co-create a

shared research framework. Moving forward, work will focus on the following:

- To support a multi-knowledge based approach to research and monitoring, California Sea Grant has recommended a National Marine Sanctuary Foundation proposal be supported to fund a **two-year series of workshops**. The workshops will be conducted through the Sanctuary Advisory Council's Research Activities Panel (RAP) to establish relationships, foundational support, and co-produce research priorities and questions.
- We will explore the **development of biocultural indicators with Chumash Peoples**. The development of the indicators, including biocultural indicators, will aid our work in the future to evaluate ecosystem health through a holistic and evidence-based approach.
- Focus on **data analysis for baseline assessments** with graduate students, interns, and other researchers will continue. Additionally, we will continue to **broaden our partnerships** with community colleges, local universities, and ocean users, specifically engaging with fishermen to understand their priorities and concerns of the marine environment.

How you can support sanctuary action plans:

- Send out information about the new sanctuary to your research, science, and monitoring communities. Remember to consider and include alternative knowledge systems and perspectives when reaching out to communities and groups.
- Disperse information to your community about NOAA student opportunities, which can be found here: <https://www.noaa.gov/education/opportunities/students>
- Disperse information to your community about NOAA grant and network opportunities: <https://www.noaa.gov/education/opportunities/grants-networks>
- If you or someone you know is interested in collaborating on research and monitoring with Chumash Heritage NMS, we ask that you review the following guidelines before reaching out:
 - Indigenous Partnerships and Collaborations: If you are interested in collaborating with an Indigenous government, Tribal organization, or non-profit, please refer to [this page with links](#) to their websites to reach out to them directly.
 - Strategic Alignment: Before reaching out, please review the sanctuary [Management Plan](#) to understand the current goals and priorities. To ensure a potential collaboration aligns with current management plans and goals, please contact us at the earliest conceptual stage of your project.
 - Advance Notice: We value early engagement. If you are considering a project within Chumash Heritage NMS, please reach out as early as possible. This ensures we have the necessary time to discuss logistics and expectations, and conduct internal reviews and resource assessments. Please consider reaching out to Indigenous governments and community members, such as the fishing community, to foster a reciprocal exchange of perspectives and ideas.
 - Letters of Support: If you are seeking a Letter of Support for a grant or project, please submit your request at least one month (30 days) in advance. If you request through holidays or busy seasons, please take into consideration additional time that may be needed.

- Flexibility and Commitments: As we are establishing our foundation, our capacity to commit staff time or resources may change. We ask for your patience if we are unable to fulfill specific requests or commitments at this time.

How to Reach Out: If your project aligns with our current mission, please send a brief introductory email to:

- Monisha Sugla, Research Ecologist, monisha.sugla@noaa.gov
- Carolina Behe, Sanctuary Superintendent, Carolina.behe@noaa.gov



Beach at Cojo anchorage. Photo: Robert Schwemmer/NOAA

Action Plans Summarized from the Management Plan

Below are brief overviews of action plans from the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary Management Plan that most closely align with the work that the team has been focused on this past year. These are provided for reference to help provide a broad context of the sanctuary's management plan goals and structure. For more information, please visit the [management plan on the website](#).

Indigenous Cultural Heritage Action Plan

Background: For time immemorial, Indigenous Peoples of this coast have lived in a reciprocal relationship of balance, adjustment, and reverence with nature, actively sustaining and caring for the environment and their culture. NOAA commits to a long-term partnership that prioritizes working with Indigenous Knowledge, protects cultural resources, and supports the self-determined interests of Chumash governments and Peoples. This collaborative approach recognizes the need for centering Indigenous voices and knowledge to advance marine conservation and support ecological health.

Goal: Respectfully honor, highlight, and protect the unique Indigenous cultural heritage, knowledge, and resources connected to the sanctuary through meaningful collaboration and partnership with Indigenous communities. This could include sharing Indigenous history and culture, where appropriate, with the public.

Action plan strategies:

- Work with Tribal and Indigenous communities to adopt an organizational framework for Tribal and Indigenous participation and collaborative co-stewardship
- Identify Indigenous cultural resources and integrate Indigenous Knowledge
- Provide protection for Indigenous cultural resources within the sanctuary
- Collaborate with Indigenous communities on education programs

Education and Outreach Action Plan

Background: The Education and Outreach (EO) Action Plan aims to bridge the gap in modern curricula by co-developing Indigenous Knowledge programs for K–12, collegiate, and community-based organizations. By aligning with national science and STEAM standards, NOAA will utilize both structured education and broad outreach—supported by a diverse network of schools, non-profits, and tourism partners—to promote ocean literacy and highlight the vital role of Indigenous perspectives in ecosystem management.

Goal: Promote and encourage appreciation and stewardship of cultural and natural resources by enhancing greater public understanding of sanctuary resources. The plan outlines a strategy

to develop an education and outreach program and grow sanctuary awareness through collaboration with partners.

Action plan strategies:

- Identify, establish, and enhance relationships with partners
- Conduct a needs assessment for a detailed communication, education, and outreach plan
- Establish core programs and messaging
- Develop a business and public affairs engagement plan
- Assess program effectiveness

Operations and Administration Action Plan

Background: Protecting the sanctuary’s unique and irreplaceable natural and cultural resources requires appropriate facilities, staff, vessels, partnerships, funding, and infrastructure. The highest priority for this action plan is the establishment of the Sanctuary Advisory Council, which is an essential component of ensuring public, including Tribal and Indigenous community, participation in sanctuary management. Additionally, establishing a NOAA presence within sanctuary communities will be imperative to strengthening the pool of partners and collaborators, an essential part of a successful sanctuary.


Goal: Create sanctuary infrastructure, staffing, advisory groups, and program support to ensure effective and efficient implementation of the management plan.

Action plan strategies:

- Establish and support a Sanctuary Advisory Council
- Develop a “NOAA presence”
- Identify and acquire staff needed to support sanctuary operations and resource protection, education and outreach, and research programs
- Develop infrastructure for research vessels, small boats, equipment, and field operations
- Seek development partnerships and opportunities that support the sanctuary’s mission
- Establish sanctuary support infrastructure that enhances sanctuary programs
- Establish a process for evaluating and reporting on sanctuary program effectiveness and management plan implementation

Resource Protection Action Plan

Background: The general approach of the resource protection program is to collaborate on management efforts with agency partners, Indigenous governments, local community groups, and organizations to identify impacts on protected resources, including plants, animals, water, seabed, cultural histories, shipwrecks, etc. Then, through improved understanding informed by multiple knowledge systems, reduce impacts, promote sustainable use and human-ocean relationships, and strengthen protection of sanctuary resources.



Resource protection issues will be addressed through proactive approaches that are regulatory in nature, such as issuing permits, emergency response, enforcement of sanctuary regulations, weighing in on future projects proposed in the sanctuary, in combination with non-regulatory strategies and activities, such as collaborative planning, resource protection-based outreach, and interpretation.

Goal: Maintain and improve the sanctuary's natural resources, biological resources, ecological resources and processes, and cultural and maritime resources by evaluating and addressing adverse impacts from human activities and applying Indigenous Knowledge and perspectives.

Action plan strategies:

- Establish a resource protection program through partnerships to protect sanctuary wildlife, habitats, qualities, and cultural resources
- Establish and implement a permitting and environmental review program
- Establish an enforcement presence and build enforcement partnerships
- Interpret and distribute resource protection information
- Respond to emergencies that threaten sanctuary resources
- Track and monitor vessel traffic compliance

Research and Monitoring Action Plan

Background: Conducting and coordinating research and monitoring is one of the essential management obligations for NOAA. Research and monitoring activities must be responsive to both existing resource protection and management concerns and must improve understanding of the ecosystem services provided by the sanctuary to local communities, including local Tribes and Indigenous communities, and the nation. Critically for this sanctuary, research and monitoring will rely on both Indigenous and Western perspectives to guide scientific planning.

Goal: Ensure the best available science is accessible to address current and projected needs of sanctuary management, resource protection, and education/outreach.

Action plan strategies:

- Develop new research partnerships and infrastructure
- Characterize and monitor the sociological trends, human dynamics, and cultural landscapes associated with the sanctuary
- Characterize and monitor the biological and physical features and processes associated with the sanctuary
- Interpret and apply scientific information and Indigenous Knowledge to meet sanctuary needs
- Develop research and monitoring projects to support issue-based action plans and emerging needs
- Support science needs and expertise