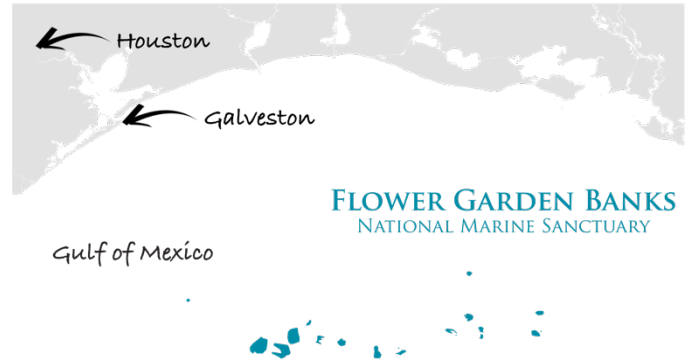




Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Accomplishments

Fiscal Year 2021

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary was established in 1992 to protect and preserve healthy coral reefs and related algal and sponge communities perched on top of small underwater mountains in the northern Gulf of Mexico, 80 to 125 miles off the coasts of Texas and Louisiana. These living communities provide habitat for a variety of wildlife, including sea turtles, manta rays, grouper, colorful reef fish, and invertebrates. Deeper areas feature long-lived black corals and octocorals.



Visit flowergarden.noaa.gov for more information.

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Expansion

In March 2021, the expansion of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary took effect. This action protects 14 additional reefs and banks, adjusts the boundaries of the sanctuary's original three banks, and expands the sanctuary from 56 square miles to a total of 160 square miles. These areas include critical habitat for recreationally and commercially important fish, as well as threatened or endangered species of manta rays, sea turtles, and corals in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico.



The expanded sanctuary protects critical habitat for commercially important species like snapper. Photo: NOAA

Important Publications Completed

Several reports were published this year, including "Strategy for Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease Prevention and Response at Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary," "Long-Term Monitoring at East and West Flower Garden Banks: 2019 Annual Report," and "Stetson Bank Long-Term Monitoring: 2015-2018 Synthesis Report." The coral disease plan identifies research needs and prevention, as well as strategies for education, preparedness, early warning, response, and intervention to avert disease spread to the sanctuary. The monitoring reports document the health and status of benthic and fish communities and water quality within the sanctuary.



The recovery of long spined sea urchin populations at Stetson Bank is being monitored by sanctuary staff. Photo: NOAA

Seaside Chats Speaker Series Goes Virtual

The sanctuary's annual Seaside Chats speaker series went virtual in February 2021 and joined forces with the National Marine Sanctuary Webinar Series to reach its largest audiences ever. Presentations on the topics of reef restoration, manta rays, and mesophotic algae were attended by a total of 1,195 people, more than five times the average attendance of the previous eight years. These online presentations also opened up opportunities for a broader pool of speakers and participants. Participants came from 40 states and 19 other countries.



Manta rays are a popular sight in the sanctuary any time of year. Photo: NOAA

Looking Ahead

- January 17, 2022 marks the sanctuary's 30th anniversary and celebratory activities will take place throughout the year. Plans include an interactive outdoor mural, a themed beverage from a local vendor, and a look at the sanctuary's history of exploration.
- As part of the condition report process, sanctuary staff will conduct workshops with subject matter experts to rate the status and trends of water quality, habitat, living resources, and maritime archaeological resources, as well as the human activities that affect them.
- Sanctuary staff will collaborate with NOAA award recipients to examine habitat requirements and ecosystem connectivity of reef-associated fishes in the sanctuary. Tagging, tracking, and bioacoustics will assess how key species use this network of reefs and banks.



The National Marine Sanctuary System is a network of underwater parks encompassing more than 600,000 square miles of marine and Great Lakes waters. The network includes a system of 15 national marine sanctuaries and Papahānaumokuākea and Rose Atoll marine national monuments.