



Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary Accomplishments

Fiscal Year 2021

Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary was designated in 1992 to protect and preserve one of the more biologically diverse ecosystems in the Gulf of Maine. Historically important as a fishing ground, the sanctuary region continues to attract commercial and recreational fishing activity. The presence of several whale and dolphin species sparked the start of east coast whale watching in the mid-1970s and now makes the sanctuary one of the world's premier whale watching destinations. The sanctuary's shipwrecks, the unfortunate yet inevitable result of centuries of ship traffic, serve as time capsules of our nation's important maritime history.

Visit stellwagen.noaa.gov for more information.



Conceptual Design of New Visitor Center

In partnership with the Town of Provincetown and the Center for Coastal Studies, the sanctuary has moved ahead with a conceptual design for a NOAA visitor center located in this popular tourist destination. The project has received enthusiastic support from town officials, local businesses, nonprofits, and residents. The proposed 10,000-square-foot facility, designed to complement local structures, would house exhibits that illustrate sanctuary marine life and resource issues, as well as reflect on Provincetown's historic links to the ocean and its present role as a gateway to the sanctuary.



The final conceptual design for the proposed NOAA Visitor Center in Provincetown. Photo: NOAA

New Protocols Allow Research Missions to Continue

Despite limitations on staffing and additional changes for small boat operations, sanctuary science missions continued throughout the year. Researchers collected and redeployed acoustic monitoring buoys and gliders for the national SanctSound project, tagged great shearwaters to continue a decade-long effort to understand seabird health and distribution, initiated a new effort to tag sharks, imaged seafloor topography and shipwrecks, and looked for chemical signatures in water samples that might lead to a better understanding of endangered North Atlantic right whale presence.



The presence of white sharks is a welcome sight in the sanctuary. Photo: NOAA

Marine Operations Center Undergoes Major Repairs

In 2021, major repairs were completed to the boathouse on Scituate Harbor, including to pilings under the facility and the bulkhead ramp to the building. The boathouse serves as the marine operations center for the sanctuary. The pilings under the boathouse were fitted with rebar-supported jackets or wrapped with composite material to prevent deterioration. The access ramp was rebuilt to allow use by heavier vehicles for the technical equipment that research missions require.



The sanctuary's marine operations center after a complete rebuild. Photo: NOAA

Looking Ahead

- A draft management plan will be released for public comment with action plans that address administration and infrastructure, research programs on marine mammals, seabirds, water quality, habitat, sound, and climate change, as well as education and outreach, compatible uses, and interagency cooperation.
- Planning has begun to celebrate the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries' 50th anniversary and Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary's 30th anniversary throughout 2022. Programs include an outdoor photography exhibit of sanctuary marine life by Keith Ellenbogen, free lectures, and programs for students and families.
- The sanctuary will resume humpback whale and seabird tagging projects and plan new studies of right whale feeding. A new NOAA grant provides funding to study a suite of additional species including sharks, turtles, other marine mammals, and seabirds to better understand habitat interactions.



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.