

STELLWAGEN BANK NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

FY17 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: Anne Smrcina/NOAA

Students not only studied whales but viewed them in the wild during a Latino Conservation Week whale watch.



Photo: Emma Hickerson/NOAA permit #18059

Whale watch naturalists provide expert knowledge about whale identification during research missions, including the 2017 whale tagging cruise.



Photo: NOAA

A team member prepares to release a tagged great shearwater.

Building new networks, educating diverse communities

Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary animals and habitats fascinated fourth-grade students from Lawrence and Boston during hands-on activities funded through a Diversity and Inclusion Grant from headquarters. The education series also highlighted the cultural and social connections between national marine sanctuaries in the Eastern U.S. and the Caribbean. Many of these students are from Caribbean descent and enthusiastically soaked up information about humpback whales, which migrate to the Caribbean Sea. The sanctuary partnered with the Hispanic Access Foundation in developing the program.

Forging new links to support recreation and tourism

Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary strengthened links to the whale watch community with the distribution of a new issue of *Stellwagen Soundings* for passengers, a **mini-course on climate change for naturalists, and further development of the “Boater Outreach for Whale Watching” program, which educates recreational boaters about safe operation around whales.** Whale watch vessels hosted sanctuary citizen scientists for seabird surveys while naturalists provided technical advice during research cruises. A **USA Today Readers’ Choice poll awarded the sanctuary first place for “Best Place to View Aquatic Life.”**

Tagging seabirds to understand ecosystem health

Satellite tags now provide invaluable information on foraging strategies of seabirds, which, in turn, allows scientists to learn more about the health of the Gulf of Maine ecosystem, an area undergoing rapid increases in water temperature. A Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary-led team tagged 20 shearwaters this summer. During the tagging process, researchers sampled feathers, blood, exhaled breath, and occasionally stomach contents to ascertain animal health, life cycle, and ingested materials.

Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary Looking Ahead to FY18

- Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary celebrates 25 years and is a premier whale watching destination and important fishing ground.
- Production of a condition report, detailing the status of various resources is underway. The product will provide guidance for the development of Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary next five-year management plan.
- Research will continue on the Stellwagen Bank **National Marine Sanctuary’s key forage fish, the sand lance.** This species is an important prey choice for many whales, seabirds and fish species that visit Stellwagen Bank.