



Anglers enjoy fishing in the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary during NOAA's "Vet Into Your Sanctuary" event in August 2019.

COURTESY, SEPP HAUKEBO

Looking for great boating? American marine sanctuaries welcome you

Boaters have a role to play in ensuring their treasured fishing, diving, and cruising grounds can be enjoyed for generations to come

Some 110 miles offshore of Galveston, Texas, in the deep subtropical waters of the Gulf of Mexico, lies a secret garden. Formed by underwater mountains, known as salt domes, rising some 450 feet from the sea floor, East and West Flower Garden Banks support a chro-

matic symphony of corals, sea plants, and marine life. Mud volcanoes bubble, moray eels peek from crevices, fish flash in kaleidoscopic formations, manta rays glide gracefully above the fray. The water pulses with life. But if it weren't for a dedicated community of advocates, it could be a very different picture.

First discovered by fishermen in the early 1900s, it wasn't until the 1960s that scientific research prompted discussions about the need to protect these unique banks from human activities like oil and gas extraction, anchoring, and harvesting. In 1979, a group of recreational divers submitted a letter nominating Flower Garden Banks as a national marine sanctuary. Thirteen years later, President George H. Bush signed the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary into existence.

Why are they necessary?

National marine sanctuaries safeguard some of the nation's most important marine and Great Lakes waters – from protecting habitat like humpback whale breeding grounds in the warm shallow waters of Hawaii to preserving important archeological sites like the



famed Civil War shipwreck *USS Monitor* off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

Today, the national marine sanctuary system comprises 14 national marine sanctuaries and two marine national monuments (Papahānaumokuākea and Rose Atoll), encompass-

Know before you go

National marine sanctuaries offer some of the best boating in the country, but there are a few things to be aware of before you visit. Each sanctuary has its own unique set of regulations, which may include prohibitions on activities like discharging materials, anchoring, use of personal watercraft, and disturbance of marine mammals, seabirds, and sea turtles. Visit sanctuaries.noaa.gov/visit to read about regs, responsible recreation, and how to get the most out of your stay.

Know of a special underwater place?

NOAA invites you to nominate your favorite marine and Great Lakes waters as a national marine sanctuary. Here are five questions you'll need to consider before you get started:

- » Does the place have natural or maritime heritage resources with special ecological, historical, cultural, or archaeological significance?
 - » Does the place have important economic uses like tourism, fishing, diving, boating, and other recreational activities?
 - » Are there potential threats facing the place's marine resources?
 - » Are there existing management/regulations that could help conserve and protect the place?
 - » Is there broad community-based support for creating a sanctuary?
- Visit nominate.noaa.gov to read more about the nomination process.

ing 662,000 square miles of marine and Great Lakes waters in the U.S.

Boaters have a voice

Local communities play a vital role in establishing national marine sanctuaries. In 2014, John Podesta, counselor to then-President Barack Obama, announced a new community-based sanctuary nomination process and invited communities across the country to nominate their 'most treasured marine and Great Lakes waters for consideration.

Previously, the process had been more top-down. "Experts would sit around a room and in good faith come up with ... areas where a national marine sanctuary designation could be helpful," says John Armor, director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. "But those ideas didn't always come from the people on the ground ... [who] would be most affected."

Today, "the sanctuary designation process is community-based from the very beginning," says Armor. "At the end of the day we can't build walls around these places. Sanctuaries don't have access gates. ... So, if these things are going to be successful, we need the community to buy in from the very beginning."

The process from nomination to designation takes several years. Once a community submits a nomination, NOAA reviews it against its criteria. If it's a

good match, it goes into an inventory of successful nominations, from which NOAA selects candidates for designation. Those nominations then undergo multiple rounds of public and stakeholder engagement. When a final designation plan has been published, the state governor and Congress have an opportunity to weigh in.

Since the new nomination process

'IF YOU KNOW ABOUT A PLACE WHERE A SANCTUARY COULD BE APPROPRIATE AND NEEDED, MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD. NOMINATE A SANCTUARY'

was established in 2014, there have been 14 nominations in all, one has been designated (Mallows Bay in Maryland), two are in the designation process (Lake Ontario and Lake Michigan), and five are currently in inventory.

Expanding existing sanctuaries

The community's role doesn't end with designation, rather they stay involved over the life of the sanctuary. National marine sanctuary advisory councils are formed to provide advice and recommendations to site superintendents. Across the marine-sanctuary system, there are more than 440 community members sitting on advisory councils, representing diverse interests including conservation, education, research, fishing, shipping, tourism, boating, and various levels of government (e.g., tribal, state, federal).

At Flower Garden Banks National

Marine Sanctuary, exploration and scientific research during the late 1990s and early 2000s led to the realization that the three banks weren't the only areas that needed protection in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico. "The advisory council for the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary decided they wanted the agency to seriously consider expanding the sanctuary," says Armor.

It took 14 years working with conservation organizations, academic institutions, the oil and gas industry, and the fishing industry to think through what an expansion would look like. Nearly 8,500 comments were received during the public comment period, 74% expressing support for sanctuary expansion.

"It took a long time, it took a lot of compromise, a lot of collaboration, and a lot of communication," says Armor. "There were moments where I wasn't sure it was going to happen. But in the end, I'm really proud of the outcome."

On January 19, 2021, NOAA issued the final rule for expansion of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, protecting an additional 14 reefs and banks, nearly tripling the protected area from 56 to 160 square miles.

What boaters can do

In 2022, NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary System will celebrate its 50th anniversary. "We're not done yet," says

30 by '30

In January, folded into President Biden's executive order "Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad," is a goal known as "30 by 30," which involves working with state, local, tribal, and territorial governments; agricultural and forest landowners; fishermen; and other key stakeholders to achieve the goal of conserving at least 30% of our lands and waters by 2030. Presently, only about 12% of U.S. land and roughly 23% of U.S. coastal waters are protected, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

A report recommending steps that the U.S. should take to achieve this goal was expected this spring from the Department of the Interior, in consultation with other relevant government agencies. The report will propose guidelines for determining whether lands and waters qualify for conservation and establish mechanisms to measure progress toward the 30% goal. The Secretary of the Interior shall subsequently submit annual reports to the task force to monitor progress.

BoatU.S. is actively monitoring this 30 by 30 initiative, along with multiple outdoor recreational groups representing fishing, hunting, and hiking.

"Anglers and boaters are some of the original conservationists," says David Kennedy, manager of the BoatU.S. Government Affairs team. "We have an abiding interest in clean water and healthy fisheries. We also need to be able to responsibly access the water. So we're working to ensure we're part of the discussion as these policies are developed."



COURTESY, NOAA (2)

Sanctuary or monument – what's the difference?

Both protect the nation's underwater treasures, but there are key differences. National marine sanctuaries and marine national monuments are designated under different federal laws. National monuments can be created, relatively quickly, by presidential proclamation, under the Antiquities Act of 1906. Whereas national marine sanctuaries are created under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act and take several years to complete due to the high level of public engagement. There are also differences in how the two are managed.



Above: Colorful sponges and bright green algae adorn the cap of Bright Bank, which is shallow enough to scuba dive. Left: These large, bushy black corals provide great hiding places for tropical fish at Geyer Bank and other deep reef habitats throughout the northwestern Gulf of Mexico.

Armor. "I think boaters know about other places that are not protected or are underprotected, where the concept of national marine sanctuary could be beneficial. It's difficult for places like Flower Garden Banks, which is 110 miles offshore. Nobody lives there; the

closest town is 110 miles away. Boaters are able to provide that community for some of these places that are offshore and hidden."

Armor encourages anyone with a nomination in mind to reach out. "We would love to work with

toward evaluating whether or not a sanctuary is a good fit,” says Armor. “If you know about a place where a sanctuary could be value-added, then make your voice heard. Nominate a sanctuary.”

He also wants boaters to get out and enjoy their marine sanctuaries. “There’s the perception of sanctuaries being this no-take area that you can’t go to, you can’t enjoy, and you certainly can’t fish,” says Armor. “That’s not what sanctuaries were set up to be. They’re set up to welcome sustainable, compatible, uses.” From diving and recreational fishing to tide pooling and heritage trails, marine sanctuaries are some of the most exceptional boating destinations in the U.S.

“We’re really interested in boaters getting out and enjoying these places,” he says. “Tie up to a mooring buoy, go for a dive, cast a line, and enjoy sustainably.”



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Check this box in every issue of _____ to see what our Government Affairs team is prioritizing as we work on a variety of national and state issues. For example:

>> **California fee increase:** [BoatU.S.](#) is working with our state partner, the Recreational Boaters of California (RBOC), to counter a proposed boat-registration fee increase from a minimum of \$20 to \$70-plus every two years. The increase is being considered as the state increasingly dedicates boater fuel tax dollars toward the state’s parks system – a practice started decades ago for these taxes, which now total \$107 million each year, according to RBOC. These boater-generated funds are meant to support programs and services that benefit boating, including launch ramps, education, local boating law enforcement, and invasive species prevention and control.

At press time, the proposed budget had been revised in response to nearly 4,000 emails to state legislators and the governor’s office. The fee increase was reduced to \$40 every two years, and the budget now calls for providing additional funding for boating, totaling \$60 million in state General Fund dollars over the next four years.