

FLOWER GARDEN BANKS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY
Sanctuary Advisory Council
Meeting Minutes
May 25, 2023

HYBRID MEETING

Meeting Attendance Roster:

Jake Emmert, Conservation, Present
Joanie Steinhaus, Conservation, Present (late arrival)
Andy Lewis, Dive Operations, Present
Kristen Maples, Dive Operations, Absent
Janavi Mahimtura Folmsbee, Recreational Diving, Absent
Chris Ledford, Recreational Diving, Present
Brian Shmaefsky, Education, Present (virtual)
Vacant, Education, Vacant
Shane Cantrell, Commercial Fishing, Present
HD Pappas, Commercial Fishing, Absent
Sepp Haukebo, Recreational Fishing, Present
Vacant, Recreational Fishing, Vacant
Don Craig, Oil and Gas Industry, Present
Steve Hamm, Oil and Gas Industry, Present
Michael Dance, Research, Present (virtual)
Diego Gil-Agudelo, Research, Absent
Alicia Caporaso, BOEM (non-voting), Present (virtual)
James Sinclair, BSEE (non-voting), Present
Vacant, EPA (non-voting), Vacant
Rusty Swafford, NOAA Fisheries (non-voting), Present
Vacant, NOAA OLE (non-voting), Vacant
Vacant, TPWD (non-voting), Vacant
Adam Peterson, USCG (non-voting), Present (virtual)
G.P. Schmahl, Sanctuary Superintendent (non-voting), Present

Total voting member attendance: 10 of 14 voting members; 8 votes needed

Others in Attendance:

Kelly Drinnen, Michelle Johnston, Marissa Nuttall, Ryan Hannum, Olivia Eisenbach, Kaitlin Brogan, Matt Brookhart, Kelly Martin

10:10 Welcome and Announcements

Today's meeting is a hybrid meeting, both in person and virtually through webinar.

Roll Call

10:15 Administrative Business and Announcements - Jake Emmert

Adoption of Agenda - Motion from Shane Cantrell, second by Don Craig. No objections, motion approved.

Adoption of Minutes - Motion from Andy Lewis, second by Sepp Haukebo. No objections, motion approved.

10:20 Sanctuary Updates - G.P. Schmahl.

G.P. Schmahl announced that he is retiring May 31, 2023. G.P. reviewed his time at NOAA with multiple anecdotes of his time with the ONMS program starting at FKNMS and then at FGBNMS. Highlights include: coral spawning, new species, and mesophotic sponge ID guide. Briefly addressed his time at FKNMS including its designation/early days and ship grounding on the reefs. The Sustainable Seas program with Sylvia Earle was one of G.P.'s first experiences at FGBNMS. Partnership with UNC Wilmington to determine deep fish habitat using ROVs. Discussed the process of obtaining a boat for the sanctuary and the lead up to building R/V MANTA.

10:50 Regional Updates - Matt Brookhart

Matt Brookhart gave an update of the ONMS program. There is a system expansion happening right now in ONMS with multiple proposed sanctuaries in the designation process. This year marks the 50th anniversary of ONMS. In addition to the new site designations, there is a reimagining of the budget, an increase in habitat restoration work, increased engagement with tribal and indigenous communities, ONMS staff transitions, and new boats and buildings being built. ONMS budget is lower than what is needed, however there is an increase in the presidential budget request for sanctuaries for FY2024.

New designations include:

- Lake Ontario NMS is the next sanctuary in the designation process. Includes the eastern part of Lake Ontario off the western part of New York. This designation is about acknowledging important maritime history.
- Hudson Canyon NMS will cover the largest submarine canyon on the Atlantic coast. This is a new proposal for designation in its earliest stages.
- Lake Erie NMS will promote historic and cultural importance off Pennsylvania.
- Chumash Heritage NMS on the west coast seeks to preserve Chumash tribal history.
- Pacific Remote Islands NMS will cover ~770,000 sq miles in western pacific to conserve highly diverse tropical marine life and numerous threatened and endangered species.

ONMS' current focus is on expansion while supporting existing sites. There is also a emphasis on budget; outreach and fundraising to support future budgets. There is an effort to build partnerships to assist with supporting both new and existing sites.

11:10 Condition Report/CVA/Coral Disease Update - Michelle Johnston

In August 2022 there was a coral disease outbreak at the Flower Garden Banks (FGB), with SCTLD-like lesions. There were three response cruises last fall to observe the disease and collect samples. Adrienne Correa headed a response cruise in March 2023 to monitor the disease. The disease is not spreading as quickly as SCTLD and therefore is thought to be closer to white plague disease. There is a meeting next week to discuss sample results with partner experts. Four photomosaics were completed during the March response cruise along with collection of fireworm and coral samples. The photostation images collected during long-term monitoring (LTM) efforts has made monitoring this disease outbreak easier.

Moody Gardens has started a Coral Lab, banking FGB corals which were taken last fall 2022. Other samples from a partner at BU will be sent to Moody Gardens to add to the Coral Lab. The Gulf of Mexico Alliance (GOMA) has reached out to FGBNMS to provide funding for coral restoration to replant these corals from Moody Gardens back on the reef. Texas Sea Grant partnership has received several grant proposals, 2-3 proposals will be selected to conduct research in FGBNMS. There will be a Gulf Reefs Symposium with partner researchers in November 2023 to address the sanctuary research needs as well as present research efforts.

The Condition Report is almost complete and will be going out for review in June 2023. The experts during this workshop determined that the sanctuary is in good shape. The only concern is for risk to human health due to ciguatera.

The Climate Vulnerability Assessment (CVA) evaluated shallow reef and mesophotic habitats as well as 23 important species on the reef. Most species had moderate vulnerability. Shallow invertebrates had higher vulnerability to climate change, but mesophotic corals were determined to be OK. The CVA is currently in its final external reviews and should be completed this year.

June cruises will include mooring buoy maintenance and drilling, a Lionfish Invitational trip, and fish tagging for Marissa Nuttall's TAMUG project. In July, there will be manta tagging, another Lionfish Invitational trip, and initial LTM cruises. August will include more LTM and coral spawning cruises, ROV, and technical diving cruises. Partner Josh Voss just completed a cruise collecting samples and performing technical diving.

11:25 Wahoo Working Group Update - Shane Cantrell

Shane Cantrell reviewed the working group which was formed in February 2023 at the last SAC meeting. The SAC can only make impacts within sanctuary boundaries, but, they can make recommendations to the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC). The best outcome would be a Fishery Management Plan (FMP) under the Magnuson-Stevens Act from the GMFMC. Regional recommendations include forming an FMP with bag/possession limits and additional research on wahoo.

For sanctuary level recommendations, the working group recommends a two wahoo per person possession limit inside the sanctuary. In addition to the possession limit, the working group recommends research to understand why wahoo are aggregating in the sanctuary. These are not spawning aggregations and understanding the factors influencing the aggregations is important to prevent overharvesting of wahoo.

11:35 Wahoo Discussion

Sepp Haukebo thinks the SAC should accept the wahoo working group recommendations. There is currently no federal management in the Gulf of Mexico for recreational or commercial fishing of wahoo. Wahoo are a charismatic species, and it is unprecedented to not have management for it. It is important to note that fishers brought this issue to the attention of the SAC. This is about sound management and the beginning of scientific research.

Jake Emmert stated that marine sanctuaries are often called “marine parks” and as such, it is important to protect the species within the boundaries. The SAC will make a motion to approve the recommendations which will then be brought to the FGBNMS superintendent.

Matt Brookhart made the comment that if recommendations are brought to the superintendent, ONMS would then go forward to NOAA Fisheries (NMFS) and the regional fishery council with the recommendations. The fishery council has three options: 1) they can consider the recommendations and decide to act on them; 2) they can say no, but the sanctuary can do management under the Sanctuary Act; or 3) do nothing.

Rusty Swafford asked how long will it be before these recommendations will get to the GMFMC? G.P. Schmahl replied that recommendations go to the superintendent who then brings the recommendations to ONMS and NMFS who will then go to the GMFMC. That process will take time and most likely will not happen for several GMFMC meetings. G.P. would like to bring these recommendations to the GMFMC no matter what to emphasize that fishers came to us.

Rusty Swafford commented that a stock assessment will be required before an FMP is made. Stock assessments can take years to complete.

Sepp Haukebo mentioned at the last GMFMC meeting the council presented a list of requirements for a species to consider an FMP. Wahoo fills most of those requirements needed for an FMP. A stock assessment may not be needed to protect a species under the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Shane Cantrell remarked that this is occurring inside the sanctuary (fishing aggregations). Taking from a sanctuary is not good.

Olivia Eisenbach clarified that the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) has an FMP covering wahoo and did not do a stock assessment. For data deficient species, a stock assessment may not be needed, but is helpful and would contribute to more efficient management.

Marissa Nuttall asked if there is a possibility of the sanctuary doing something in the interim while the process of going to the fishery council takes place? G.P. Schmahl explained there are emergency protocols that the sanctuary can take for management within the sanctuary, however this probably would not be applicable for that protocol.

Shane Cantrell expects this process to take 3-5 years. James Sinclair commented it is good that this would not be considered an emergency, and that at this time it is proactive management.

Joanie Steinhaus asked how is this not an emergency based on the photos shown to the SAC at the February 2023 meeting? Shane Cantrell explained this is not a population threat at the moment. These are not spawning aggregations which would make it an emergency. This is happening inside the sanctuary which makes it our responsibility. If this was occurring outside the boundaries, this would fall under the GMFMC.

Sepp Haukebo added we don't have great indications of population status. It is mostly unknown.

Shane Cantrell made the motion for the recommendations to be approved. Second from Michael Dance. No objections, motion approved.

12:00 Cruise Ship Industry Discussion - Marissa Nuttall/Joanie Steinhaus

At a previous meeting, Leslie Clift shared documents from the Pacific coast sanctuaries regarding cruise ships in/near sanctuaries. This brought concern for the potential for impacts of cruises leaving Galveston and their proximity to FGBNMS.

Marissa Nuttall presented data regarding Galveston cruise ships, including impacts from noise, trash, sewage, ballast water, and carbon emissions. There are two regulations regarding ballast water: international and US ballast water exchange can only occur at least 50 nm (international) or 200 nm (US) away from shore. Most ships have a UV treatment for their ballast water.

There is concern for impacts on marine mammals, including Rice's Whales. In 2022, there were 20 cruise ships that ported in Galveston representing five companies. These cruises mostly had Caribbean destinations. There are 362 cruises scheduled for 2023. Max speed of the cruise ships is 22 knots. The shipping fairway runs through Rice's Whale habitat in northern Gulf of Mexico.

Cruise ships mainly traveled within the shipping lanes, but once they got to the continental edge, they moved directly to their destinations. There is more use of the eastern shipping lane and cruise ships are traveling faster in that fairway. McGrail Bank has the closest proximity to cruise ships, within 6 km, and sometimes the ships move directly over the bank. Rezak and Sidner Banks also had cruise ships that went over them. There is more distance between cruise ships and the western banks of the sanctuary. Therefore, McGrail should be a priority for cruise ship impacts in the sanctuary.

Sepp Haukebo asked if there are any hydrophones near the shipping lanes? Marissa Nuttall stated that Geyer Bank has a hydrophone that has been out for almost a year. Stetson Bank just got one, Sidner and Rezak banks are also scheduled to get hydrophones.

Sepp asked if smaller vessels are also being looked at for hydrophone data? Marissa responded, not for the Rooker project, but the soundtrap at Stetson Bank will be analyzed for anthropogenic noise.

Can cruise ships sail outside shipping lane boundaries, or do they need to stay within the lane? Kait Brogan explained, there are rules for navigating on the water, similar to how there are road rules. With this being so far offshore, there are no regulations to remain inside the lanes.

Shane Cantrell - There have been discussions of adding more cruise terminals to Galveston. Number of cruises is going to increase. The eastern shipping lane with faster speeds and more traffic is usually used for ships returning to Galveston. A NOAA comment period is in early stages to limit ship speed within Rice's Whale habitat (similar to Right Whale conservation in the Atlantic). Slower speed means longer time in whale habitat, but would decrease damage to the whales.

Michelle Johnston- In Thunder Bay NMS, the Viking Cruises work with the sanctuary and even visit the sanctuary providing a tour. They provide education/outreach to the cruise passengers about the sanctuary and importance of the habitat. It may be a good idea to work with the cruise companies in Galveston for education/outreach efforts for FGBNMS, Rice's Whale, and impacts of cruise ships. Having a display about FGBNMS on each cruise ship with this information for cruise passengers could be a good idea.

Joanie Steinhaus had tried to partner with the cruise ships about 10 years ago, but they were not very receptive. There is a website that reports where ships are dumping ballast water which occurs off the southern point of FL. This means there is potential for the ballast water to enter the Gulf of Mexico.

Sepp Haukebo recommends the SAC should consider having a non-voting SAC member position from the cruise industry. This might open communications with the cruises.

Jake Emmert- for next meeting, we should add more discussion about cruise ship industry to the agenda and further discuss adding a member to the SAC from the industry.

G.P. Schmahl - Some of the ships have been more proactive in having ballast water treatment. It is important to note that ballast water and sewage dumping have different rules and regulations.

Kait Brogan explained, it is easier for ships to treat sewage than dump it untreated and therefore most ships are probably treating sewage. Past 12 nm offshore, there are no regulations for dumping sewage. This is probably not too much of a concern for the sanctuary since most ships do treat sewage. For ballast water, ships will not exchange water while transiting or in the middle of a shipping lane. There are designated spots in the ocean for ballast exchange. On the charts there are sewage dumping grounds and ballast exchange spots. NOAA boats going to
a require all passengers to watch a video about the marine monument before
boarding the ships. The Office of Coast Survey will most likely be in charge of regulating ship speed within Rice's whale habitat if those regulations happen, however it will be very difficult to regulate.

Shane Cantrell - There are a variety of ways for NMS and cruises to interact. In Key West and other sanctuaries, there are no more public docks for cruises. Having a video to show passengers on the cruise ships would be an educational outreach victory. There are sanctuaries and cruise ships interacting in other. It is important to start that communication with cruise ships in Galveston.

Joanie Steinhaus- On April 19, 2023 there was an article from the Galveston cruise companies addressing cruise statistics and impacts. Cruise sailings were up 22%, number of passengers were up over 100%, parking was up 140%, Galveston is the 4th most popular cruise ship port in the US, and there is potential to have 30 million people come to Galveston's port. There is talk of a new terminal for Galveston. Safety management division regulates speed, however there are currently no speed restrictions inside shipping lanes. NOAA recommends 10 knots for their vessels. Ballast water exchange needs to be 200 nm offshore with the ballast exchange ground off of Key West. Cruises have a large carbon footprint and they are trying to improve on that. The article also addresses the environmental impacts of cruises.

Jake Emmert - We should revisit the letter composed by Joanie and Marissa addressing potential impacts of Cruises to the sanctuary and the marine habitats and further discuss this issue at the next meeting in the agenda.

Michelle Johnston has connections to Disney and may be able to get a contact for their cruises to discuss these ideas of education and outreach on the Galveston cruises. We may just need to start with one cruise company. Joanie Steinhaus agreed that the reach would be huge if we were to get education and outreach on these cruises as millions of people would see it.

12:40 Public Comment

No public comment

12:45 New Business

There used to be "Friends of the Sanctuary" trips that would connect SAC members and staff to others to learn about and see the sanctuary. There have been talks with Andy Lewis about restarting these trips on the Fling starting this year in Sept.

Andy Lewis- Under sanctuary regulations, the only way to get constituents in place is having a good mooring system. There is a lack of mooring buoys at the sanctuary. There is a lot of activity at the banks and it would be good to have an update at the next meeting about the status of mooring buoys at the sanctuary. Andy presented a plaque to G.P. in recognition of his work and leadership managing and conserving FGBNMS. The plaque is from the dive community.

Jake Emmert - A research cruise was conducted last week using rebreathers. The cruise was very successful. Safety concerns are a priority for technical diving off the RV MANTA. There are some added logistics with technical diving, but there are many opportunities for further technical diving operations.

Marissa Nuttall - The NOAA Dive Center is moving forward with increasing capacity with rebreathers.

Matt Brookhart announced Michelle Johnston is the NOAA employee of the month for May 2023. Michelle was given this award for her response to the disease outbreak last fall and having a protocol already in place.

13:05 Adjourn

Next meeting is scheduled for September 20, 2023.