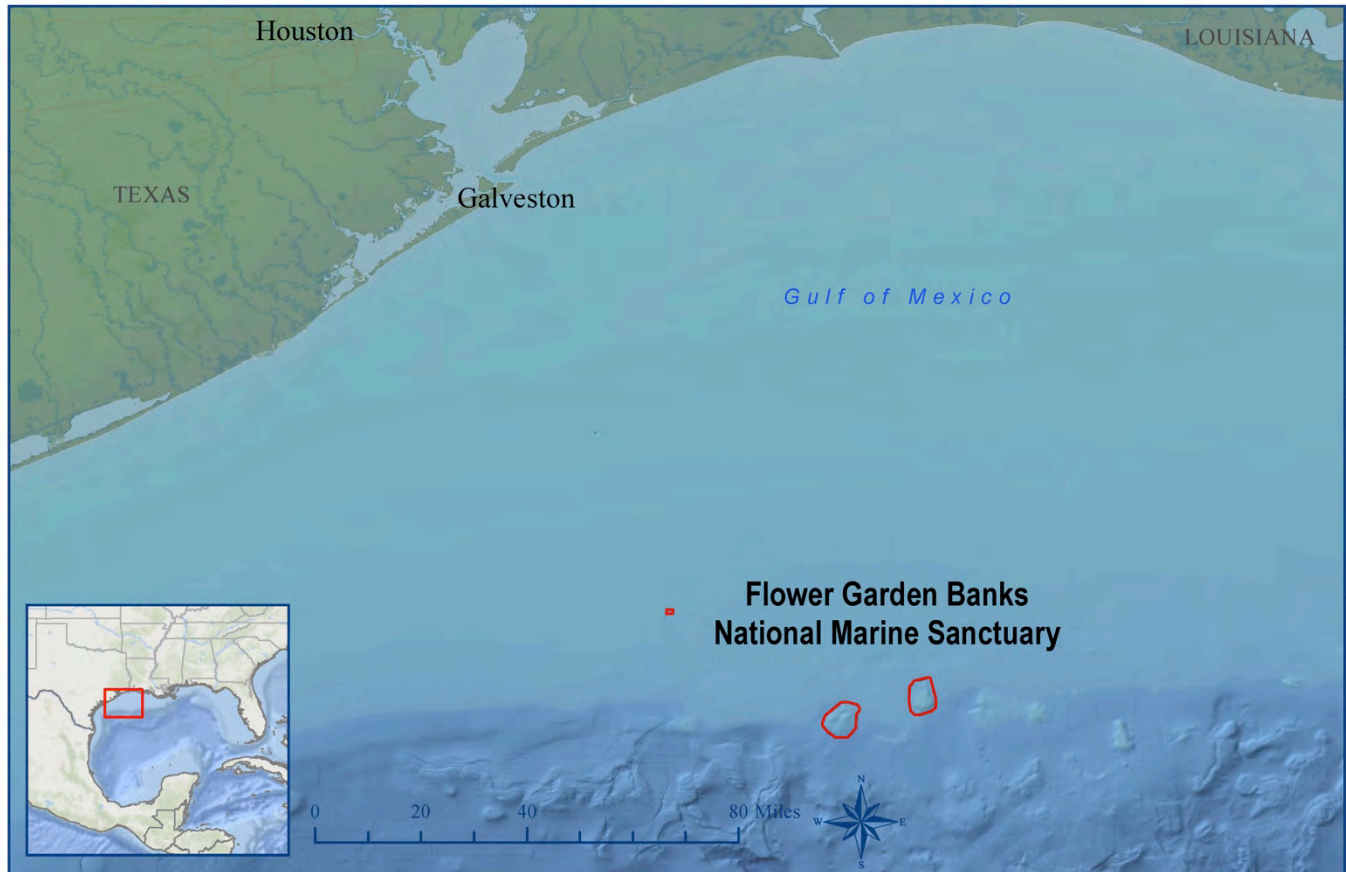


FY18 Accomplishments



BACKGROUND

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary was established in 1992 to protect and preserve small underwater mountains created by salt domes. These salt domes rise from the depths of the Gulf of Mexico and are separated from each other by miles of open ocean. The tops of the banks are covered by gardens of coral, sponges and algae that provide habitat for a variety of tropical wildlife.

Flower Garden Banks 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.

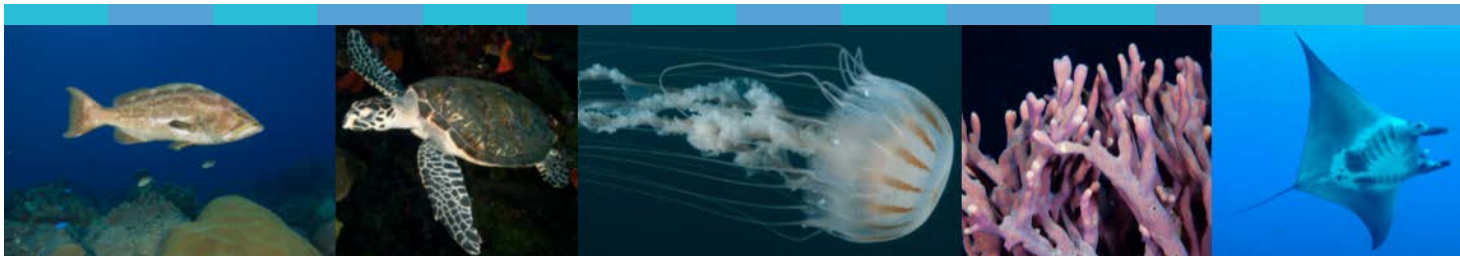


Photo: FGBNMS/UNCW-UVP

Geyer Bank is one of the areas proposed to be included in the sanctuary.



Photo: G.P. Schmahl

Markings on the underside of manta rays are used to identify individuals.



Photo: Savannah Mehrtens

A teacher takes in the view as she paddles across Galveston Bay where participants learned how to measure various parameters of water quality.

Sanctuary Expansion

In 2016, NOAA proposed expansion of the sanctuary to include hotspots of biodiversity that provide critical ecosystem services for the Gulf of Mexico. The Sanctuary Advisory Council has reviewed the proposal and recommended a modified version of the alternative submitted by the sanctuary. Staff will consider the SAC's recommendation, along with those from other interested members of the public, when determining the ultimate proposal. The Notice of Proposed Rulemaking is expected to be published in 2019, and the Final Environmental Impact statement in the fall of 2019.

Manta Ray Nursery Discovered

Scuba divers are fascinated by the manta rays at the sanctuary, identifying individuals by unique markings on their underside. It has long been acknowledged that the observed manta rays were smaller than most. Recently, however, a Hollings Scholar conducted research that identified the sanctuary as a juvenile manta ray habitat, the first of its kind to be described in a scientific study. The sanctuary sponsored a webinar hosted by the scientist to bring this new information to the public.

Education Workshop

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, in partnership with NOAA Education and the non-profit organization Artist Boat, provided educators with the knowledge and skills to feel confident including the subject of climate change in their curricula. During a 4-day long workshop, 48 educators experienced a combination of classroom and field work focusing on various aspects of climate change. Participants learned the difference between weather and climate and ways to navigate the science, religion and politics around climate change. This deeper understanding will result in more powerful integration of NOAA-related science into classroom curricula, practices and programs.

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Looking Ahead to FY19

- As NOAA considers expanding the boundaries of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking and the Final Environmental Impact Statement are anticipated to be released in 2019.
- The sanctuary will focus on building a stronger volunteer corps. The research team will continue to attract and develop divers as research volunteers. Specific education and outreach avenues for volunteers will be developed.
- The annual mass coral spawning event will be documented and live-streamed in August. The program will involve real-time observation of the event with a remotely operated vehicle. These observations will be broadcast live to a variety of audiences.