

3.6 *Visitor Use Action Plan*

Background

Visitor use was identified as a priority issue during the management plan review process. In response, the sanctuary advisory council formed a subcommittee to address this issue. The Visitor Use Action Plan (VUAP) makes recommendations to enhance information about visitors to the sanctuary. It makes additional recommendations to reduce user conflicts and to protect the property owned and maintained by NOAA. The potential impacts to natural resources from the specific activities conducted by visitors are addressed in the Resource Protection Action Plan.

The primary user groups visiting the sanctuary are recreational divers, recreational fishers, commercial fishers, researchers, oil and gas support and general boaters. Most recreational divers and many recreational fishers access the sanctuary through diving and fishing charter operations. When visiting the sanctuary, most vessels utilize one of a number of mooring buoys maintained by FGBNMS, although others may simply transit the sanctuary or drift. With the exception of the major diving charter operations, insufficient information exists as to the level and precise location of most of the existing visitor use in the sanctuary. Due to the distance from shore, it has been extremely difficult to monitor visitor use levels at the sanctuary, so more information is needed on the types of activities and when such activities occur.

The sanctuary is becoming internationally known as a prime recreational dive and fishing destination. With increased recognition and improved vessel technology, higher levels of visitation are likely. As visitor use increases, demand for mooring buoys will also increase, potentially leading to user conflict and possible safety issues.

Purpose

The purpose of the VUAP is to promote multiple uses of the sanctuary compatible with resource protection and to protect NOAA property. The VUAP contributes to the FGBNMS *Goal 4*—Manage and facilitate multiple sustainable uses of FGBNMS compatible with the primary purpose of resource protection.

Strategies and Activities

The VUAP has three strategies and associated activities to foster safe and compatible human uses.

VU.1 – Improve the quantity and quality of visitor information needed to make management decisions.

- Activity 1.1 Develop and implement a voluntary vessel registration system.
- Activity 1.2 Develop and implement a visitor use monitoring program using the best available technology.

VU.2 – Reduce the potential for user conflict and promote compatible uses.

- Activity 2.1 Revise FGBNMS regulations to require that all vessels in the sanctuary exhibit either the blue and white International Code flag “A” (“alpha” dive flag) or the red and white “divers down” flag whenever diving activities are being conducted.
- Activity 2.2 Consider revising FGBNMS regulations to require a minimum distance between

vessels displaying an “alpha” dive flag and approaching vessels.
Activity 2.3 Develop guidelines for proper use of mooring buoys.

VU.3 – Protect and maintain NOAA property.

Activity 3.1 Consider establishing FGBNMS regulations to prohibit damaging sanctuary and other authorized equipment.

Activity 3.2 Establish a mooring buoy plan.

VU.1 Improve the quantity and quality of visitor information needed to make management decisions.

The sanctuary currently does not have a comprehensive program aimed at determining who typically visits the sanctuary, what type of activities are occurring in the sanctuary, and when are such activities occurring. Most of the information known about visitor use comes from anecdotal information shared by visitors or observed by sanctuary staff.

Visitation by SCUBA divers and anglers is estimated to be relatively modest at present, compared to some other marine parks, but visitation by SCUBA divers and anglers is expected to increase. Estimates of diver use are between 2,500 and 3,000 divers per year resulting in at least 10,000 dives annually in the sanctuary. Most of these divers arrive in a dive charter vessel. Private vessels and researchers also visit the banks.

The level of recreational and commercial fishing at the sanctuary is not precisely known. Reports by long-time users of the sanctuary and observations by sanctuary staff and others suggest that the level of fishing activity has been increasing in recent years. Stetson Bank is heavily used during the spring mackerel season. Anglers also target Wahoo aggregations, which are currently without catch limits, at East and West Flower Garden Banks. Large commercial charter fishing vessels (“headboats”) have been observed regularly at Stetson Bank and smaller fishing charters offer trips to the Flower Garden Banks.

Activity 1.1 Develop and implement a voluntary vessel registration system.

A web-based system to report visitation, activities, and observations could significantly improve the quantity and quality of information on visitor use at FGBNMS. Already, the sanctuary has established a program for voluntary reporting observations of wildlife through forms available on the sanctuary website. Sanctuary staff will evaluate web-based reporting systems, develop a reporting mechanism, and identify reporting requirements. Implementing this program requires analyses to evaluate the burden to the public and the benefit of the desired information. Initially, the system would be voluntary in order to test the concept and technological aspects of such a system, but a mandatory system may be considered in the future.

Education and outreach will be an important component of a new vessel registration system and will enhance compliance with the program. Sanctuary staff will develop an outreach program and appropriate products to inform visitors and instruct them how to report their visitation and activities.

A reporting system will be developed to present the information collected via the registration

system. Sanctuary staff will also develop a process to determine compliance levels and evaluate ways to improve compliance. Based on that evaluation, the vessel registration system will be revised and updated, if necessary.

Activity 1.2 Develop and implement a visitor use monitoring program using the best available technology.

To address the need for information relating to visitor use of FGBNMS, sanctuary staff will explore several methods, including the best available technology and traditional direct observation on the water. Using multiple methods will help ground truth reports from the voluntary vessel registration system.

Recent technology offers improved ways of obtaining information on vessels visiting or transiting the sanctuary. These technological methods use various communication and navigation systems (e.g., VHF radio, satellite, GPS) to automatically track vessel movement, and include Automatic Identification System (AIS) and Vessel Monitoring System (VMS). The AIS is a shipboard broadcast system that acts like a transponder, operating in the VHF maritime band, and provides navigational safety information, including the vessel's identity, type, position, course, speed, navigational status and other information. The U.S. Coast Guard requires most commercial vessels, other than passenger and fishing vessels, to operate AIS equipment. The USCG utilizes AIS to direct shipping traffic in and around many port facilities.

A Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) is a vessel monitoring tool for improving the effectiveness of resource management that provides, at a minimum, vessel location and speed at a given time. The system is used by the NOAA Office for Law Enforcement (OLE) to monitor and survey fishing vessels for compliance with area-specific fishing regulations, and to track and prosecute violations. OLE maintains the confidentiality of fishing positions. In the Gulf of Mexico, all owner/operators of vessels with a commercial vessel permit for Gulf reef fish are required to have an operating VMS unit onboard. It is anticipated that most, if not all, commercial fishing vessels will be required to utilize VMS in the future. While this data is strictly confidential and is not publicly available, specific inquiries can be made through OLE about general VMS activity in the sanctuary, as necessary.



Recreational fishers at Stetson Bank. Photo: FGBNMS

VU.2 Reduce the potential for user conflict and promote compatible uses.

As interest and use in the sanctuary increases, there will potentially be conflicts among users arising from competing objectives. As an example, recreational fishers and dive vessels may compete for use of the same reef areas. Typically, recreational fishers target the same types of large fish that divers travel to the sanctuary to see. In addition, fishing in an area where diving is occurring can pose a potential safety risk. This type of user conflict is already occurring, especially at Stetson Bank, and will only intensify as numbers increase.

As the number of users increases, it is anticipated that competition for mooring buoys will also increase. Currently, the maximum size of individual vessels allowed to use mooring buoys is 100 feet, but the number or type of vessels is not addressed. Use of the mooring buoys is currently guided by a first-come, first-served policy, which could lead to conflicts without additional installations of mooring buoys. It could also lead to maintenance or safety concerns if multiple vessels tie to individual existing buoys, causing excessive strain on the mooring system.

Activity 2.1 Revise FGBNMS regulations to require that all vessels in the sanctuary exhibit either the blue and white International Code flag “A” (“alpha” dive flag) or the red and white “sports diver” flag whenever diving activities are being conducted.

NOAA will revise FGBNMS regulations to require that all vessels engaged in diving activities at FGBNMS clearly exhibit either the blue and white International Code flag “A” (“alpha” flag) or the red and white “sports diver” flag whenever a SCUBA diver from that vessel is in the water, and remove it once all divers exit the water and return on board the vessel. Because the entire sanctuary is within federal waters, use of the “alpha” flag would be consistent with the U.S. Coast Guard requirement (33 C.F.R. § 83.27) for small vessels engaged in diving operations whenever these vessels are restricted in their ability to maneuver if divers are attached to the vessel. However, in sports diving, where divers are usually free swimming, the alpha flag does not have to be shown and the Coast Guard encourages the continued use of the traditional sports diver flag. The sports diver flag is an unofficial signal that, through custom, has come to be used to protect the diver in the water. See the “Eighth Coast Guard District Special Notice To Mariners Gulf Of Mexico 00-2008” for more detailed information (<http://www.uscg.mil/d8/waterways/marinfo.asp>). Use of a dive flag, consistent with U.S. Coast Guard requirements and recommendations promotes better enforcement of sanctuary regulations.

Activity 2.2 Consider revising FGBNMS regulations to require a minimum distance between vessels exhibiting an “alpha” dive flag and approaching vessels.

Other national marine sanctuaries have regulations that regulate vessel operation in proximity to vessels exhibiting dive flags. For example, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary requires operation of a vessel at a no-wake speed within 100 feet of vessels displaying dive flags. FGBNMS does not currently have a dive flag regulation. A change to the regulations to require a minimum distance between vessels and dive flags will improve safety and reduce conflict between divers and vessel operations.

NOAA proposes to require that vessel operators stay at least 100 feet away from a vessel displaying the “alpha” dive flag. It will also require that a vessel operator maintain a lower speed, to be

determined during a subsequent rulemaking process with public input, while the vessel is within 300 feet of a vessel displaying the “alpha” flag. As an exception, the requirement to stay at least 100 feet away from a vessel displaying a dive flag will not apply when directly approaching, securing to, and departing from a sanctuary mooring buoy.

Activity 2.3 Develop guidelines for proper use of mooring buoys.

Improper use of sanctuary mooring buoys may cause damage to the buoys and their anchoring systems and result in increased wear on mooring buoy components. FGBNMS will develop guidelines or best practices for vessels utilizing the mooring buoy system. The guidelines will address subjects such as the proper amount of scope to use under various sea conditions, how to approach and tie off to a mooring buoy, how to determine if the mooring buoy has been damaged or compromised and vessel weight guidelines.

VU.3 Protect and maintain NOAA property.

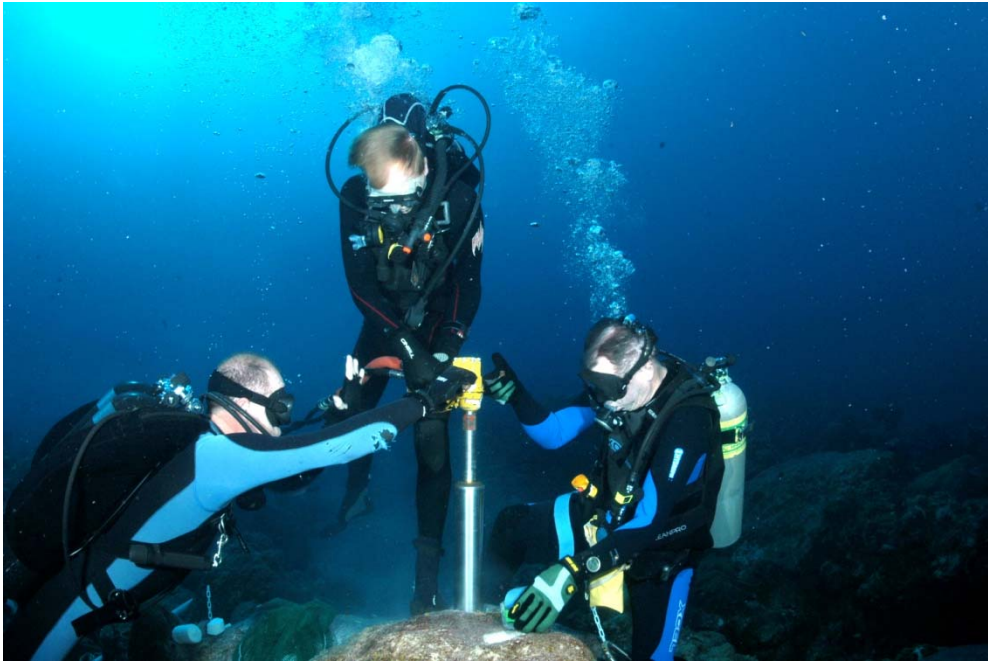
In order to allow vessels to visit the sanctuary without dropping anchor, FGBNMS staff deploy and maintain mooring buoys at the sanctuary. Up to 17 mooring buoys are located at East and West Flower Garden Banks and Stetson Bank at any one time. Buoys are periodically removed for maintenance. There are several other types of buoys in place around FGBNMS. They collect information on water quality and meteorological conditions that may be used by private boaters, commercial charter operators, industry, government or anyone interested in learning more about on site conditions in and near the sanctuary. The remote location, depths and complexities of the sanctuary make it necessary for researchers to use a wide variety of tools and technology to research, explore, monitor and manage this ocean treasure. This strategy focuses on maintaining NOAA property essential to sanctuary management.

Activity 3.1 Consider establishing FGBNMS regulations to prohibit damaging NOAA property and other authorized equipment.

FGBNMS proposes to implement regulations to prohibit damage to sanctuary and other authorized equipment such as marker buoys, mooring buoys, navigation aids and scientific instrumentation. The regulation will be similar to those in place at Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The ONMS will propose revisions to sanctuary regulations to protect NOAA property.

Activity 3.2 Establish a mooring buoy plan.

FGBNMS staff will create a plan that will evaluate the need for additional buoys and their seasonal location, both in the existing sanctuary and in new areas under consideration in the sanctuary expansion process, if applicable. The plan will also provide for the continued deployment and maintenance of the existing mooring buoy system.



Buoy installation in the sanctuary. Photo: FGBNMS

Table 11: Estimated Costs for the Visitor Use Action Plan

Activity	Estimated Cost (\$000)					Total Estimate 5-Year Cost	Priority Level
	YR 1	YR 2	YR 3	YR 4	YR 5		
(1.1) Vessel registration system	0	10	10	15	15	50	High
(1.2) Visitor use monitoring	0	25	50	50	50	175	Medium
(2.1) “Alpha” dive flag	0	0	0	0	0	0	High
(2.2) Vessel minimum distance	0	0	0	0	0	0	Medium
(2.3) Mooring buoy guidelines	0	0	0	0	0	0	Low
(3.1) Damage to property	0	0	0	0	0	0	Medium
(3.2) Mooring buoy plan	35	50	50	75	100	310	Medium
Total Estimated Annual Cost	35	85	110	140	165	535	

Table 12. Performance Measures for the Visitor Use Action Plan

Visitor Use Action Plan Activity	Performance Measure	Baseline	Description	Link to National Program Performance Measures
Activity 1.1 Develop and implement a voluntary vessel registration system.	By 2013, FGBNMS staff will develop and implement a voluntary vessel registration system to track sanctuary visitors.	There is currently no vessel registration system in place for FGBNMS visitation.	n/a	Characterization (PART)
Activity 1.2 Develop and implement a visitor use monitoring program using the best available technology and direct contact.	By 2013, FGBNMS staff will publish a report establishing a baseline of visitor use of the sanctuary and identifying gaps in the currently available information.	Current resources (e.g., VMS, aerial photography, divers' perception study from Texas A&M) need to be analyzed to provide a baseline of the available information on visitor use. Further needs for information will be identified upon analysis of the available information.	n/a	Characterization (PART)
Activity 3.2 Establish a mooring buoy plan.	By 2013, FGBNMS staff will develop a plan for the installation of additional mooring buoys.	There are currently some buoys in the sanctuary, but the number of buoys is not adequate.	This plan will focus on characterizing the need for additional buoys and their seasonal location, both in the existing sanctuary and in new areas under consideration in the sanctuary expansion process.	n/a