

## Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Accomplishments

Fiscal Year 2020

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary was established in 1992 to protect and preserve healthy coral reefs and related algal and sponge communities perched on top of small underwater mountains in the northern Gulf of Mexico, 80 to 115 miles off the coasts of Texas and Louisiana. These living communities provide habitat for a variety of wildlife, including sea turtles, manta rays, grouper, colorful reef fish, and invertebrates. Deeper areas feature long-lived black corals and octocorals.



Visit [flowergarden.noaa.gov](http://flowergarden.noaa.gov) for more information.

### Proposed rule for sanctuary expansion released

In May, NOAA issued a notice of proposed rulemaking for the expansion of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary from 56 to 160 square miles, incorporating portions of 14 additional reefs and banks off the coasts of Texas and Louisiana. These areas support mesophotic and deep coral communities and provide habitat for a variety of fish species. NOAA received more than 36,000 public comments on the proposed rule, which demonstrated overwhelming support for sanctuary expansion. Many comments expressed interest in even larger areas than those proposed.



Marine ecosystems in the proposed expansion areas support fish and invertebrate communities of biological and economic importance.  
Photo: G.P. Schmahl/NOAA

### Stetson monitoring historical report published

Stetson Bank became part of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary in 1996 and supports a diverse community of sponges and coral, as well as an abundant fish community. This newly published report documents historical research activities and observations and summarizes key biological and geological findings from its discovery through 2015. In the time frame documented in this report, significant changes in the benthic organisms have occurred, shifting from a community characterized by hydrocoral and sponges to one dominated by algae. The fish community seems to be variable, with periodic recruitment events.



Vertical outcroppings at Stetson Bank support diverse sponges and invertebrates.  
Photo: G.P. Schmahl/NOAA

## Baseline ecological assessment of artificial reef

Oil and gas platform High Island A-389-A is located within the sanctuary near East Flower Garden Bank. A published report summarizes fish and benthic community observations collected from the platform before and after removal of the upper 20 meters of the platform in July 2018. The artificial structure is covered by a fouling community comprised of sponges, hydroids, algae, shellfish, barnacles, and several stony coral species. Significant changes in the biological community were reported after the removal of the working deck and associated equipment above water, which served as a shade structure.



A diver conducts a roving fish survey in the upper portion of the High Island A-389-A platform, before partial removal.  
Photo: Ryan Eckert/NOAA

## Aquarium-Sanctuary Partnership program initiated

The sanctuary developed action plans with three aquariums through the newly established Aquarium-Sanctuary Partnerships for America's Keystone Wildlife, a program coordinated by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and supported by the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation. Action plans focus on key wildlife species within the sanctuary that will be part of collaborative efforts to conduct fieldwork, promote sanctuary interpretation, and encourage citizen stewardship. Some activities planned for the 2020 field season were postponed due to the pandemic.



Invasive lionfish are a focal species under the Aquarium-Sanctuary Partnership Program.  
Photo: Marissa Nuttall/NOAA

## Looking Ahead

- The final rule for expansion of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary was published on January 19, 2021. The sanctuary expansion will go into effect following 45 days of continuous congressional session.
- Work will begin on the sanctuary condition report, a document used to inform the succeeding management plan review process. Since the last report was released in 2008, the sanctuary program has developed additional criteria for assessment, including a socioeconomic evaluation.
- The sanctuary will collaborate with NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program to improve and integrate their ongoing coral reef monitoring programs. This will result in a streamlined program where methods are calibrated and data is collected annually, enhancing both reporting efforts.

## NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY SYSTEM



The National Marine Sanctuary System is a network of underwater parks encompassing more than 600,000 square miles of marine and Great Lakes waters. The network includes a system of 14 national marine sanctuaries and Papahānaumokuākea and Rose Atoll marine national monuments.