

**Meeting Summary**  
**Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary**  
**Advisory Council Meeting – October 22, 2020**

**Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC)**

**Attendees**

Michael Denmark, Chair  
Scott Noakes, Vice-Chair  
Mona Behl, Secretary  
Peter Auster  
Paulita Bennett-Martin  
LT James Bruce  
SGT Mark Carson  
Robert Crimian  
Rick DeVictor  
Amy Farak  
Joseph Glenn  
Monique Gordon  
Kathy Knowlton  
Lauren Stefaniak

**Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary (GRNMS) Staff**

Stan Rogers, Superintendent  
Cristin Archer  
LTJG Justin Miyano  
Ben Prueitt  
Michelle Riley  
Kim Roberson  
Alison Soss

**GRNMS Foundation (GRNMSF) Staff**

Jody Patterson

**Meeting Volunteers**

Erin Arneson  
Mary Dillard

**Primary SAC Members Absent**

Carolyn Belcher  
Colby Harris  
CAPT Chris Hodge  
Ben Hughes  
Mark Padgett  
Suzanne VanPerreren

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**Council Business**

Council Chair Michael Denmark called the Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary (GRNMS) Advisory Council meeting to order at 10:03 AM. Due to the virtual nature of this meeting, Ben Prueitt reviewed some meeting etiquette for the webinar. Denmark then welcomed volunteers Mary Dillard and Erin Arneson who recorded minutes, Lt. Nikki Corbett (USCG), Ben Prueitt and Cristin Archer who facilitated the GoToWebinar meeting, and members of the general public. Denmark addressed expected hindrances with the virtual meeting and encouraged council feedback from members.

Denmark publicly thanked Elaina Jorgensen for her assistance during her summer rotation as part of the NOAA Leadership Competencies Development Program. Denmark thanked the Council's Executive Committee, Mona Behl and Scott Noakes for

their support over the past several months. Minutes from the April 30, 2020 council meeting were approved with no objections.

Sanctuary Resource Protection Specialist Update - Superintendent Stan Rogers updated the council on the phase and process of hiring a new Resource Protection Specialist. He said the first week of November would be the interview stage of the hiring process.

SAC Member Seat Update - Rogers announced the K-12 Education seat was approved and refilled by Monique Gordon who is entering her second 3-year term in that seat. The Living Resources, Research Representative seat was approved and refilled by Dr. Peter Auster who is entering his third 3-year term. The Citizen-at-Large seat was approved and refilled by Michael Denmark for his third 2-year term. Denmark later concluded this section that this term will be his final term on the advisory council.

Sanctuary Superintendent Report - Stan Rogers provided a report for sanctuary efforts through summer 2020 and what lies ahead for the sanctuary. Since March 2020, sanctuary staff explicitly worked remotely which has been a productive adjustment. The biggest adjustments to COVID-19 were (1) rescheduling, canceling, and reimaging the Gray's Reef Expo, and (2) transitioning sanctuary research diving operations to contract diving. Accomplishments during the last fiscal year included (1) completing multibeam mapping of the sanctuary on the 2020 NOAA Ship *Nancy Foster* mission, (2) publication in The Associated Press and cascading coverage highlighting national marine sanctuaries picked up by over 12,000 media outlets, (3) a virtual Get Into Your Sanctuary event, and (4) the publication of the Research Area Report of ongoing research in the designated research area.

Gray's Reef research partners with NOAA National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science (NCOOS) and West Virginia University have been studying visitor use at the sanctuary. A West Virginia University study surveyed licensed Georgia fishermen on their perception and use of the sanctuary and results are being analyzed.

Looking forward, priorities at Gray's Reef national marine sanctuary include: (1) negotiating a cooperative agreement with the University of Georgia, (2) continued engagement with the advisory council and finding virtual ways for council members to connect with their communities, (3) reinvigorating our volunteer and intern support programs, (4) establishing a visitor center in downtown Savannah, and (5) reimaging the Gray's Reef Expo in conjunction with the Coastal Heritage Society, Savannah Children's Museum, and Tybee Island Marine Science Center.

Regarding science team planning in spite of COVID-19, Gray's Reef plans on (1) socializing the Gray's Reef science plan with support and review of the advisory council, (2) planning for continued funding of the Sanctuary Sound project beyond the U.S. Navy funding agreement ending in FY 2022, (3) identifying priorities of the 2021 *Nancy Foster* expedition, and (4) continuing Black sea bass tagging operations.

The purpose of the GRNMS Science plan document is to communicate and garner support from more partners. Partners can then pursue federal funding to advance research activities at Gray's Reef.

Filling the vacant Resource Protection Specialist position is progressing as previously stated (see Sanctuary Resource Protection Specialist Update above). Filling this position will provide availability to continue the visitor use project. Rogers hopes to reinvigorate the connectivity working group to support the condition report and management plan updates; by FY2024, the new management plan is expected to be in place. An upcoming goal of the sanctuary is to establish priority study areas to assess conservation needs comparatively inside and outside of the sanctuary.

Sanctuary operations updates include the recruitment of an Operations Specialist, and having two operational vessels - the *R/V Sam Gray* and *R/V Joe Furgeson*. New technologies like the Gray's Reef Rover (GRover) are expected to move through sea trials and functionality tests when boat operations are restored to a normal operations cycle.

Rogers opened the floor to questions.

Peter Auster commented that the chair of the Connectivity Working Group, AC chair, and superintendent should caucus in a separate meeting to assess the status of working group progress and identify appropriate next steps.

Joseph Glenn asked a clarifying question about the process for hiring the boat captain. Rogers responded that the position is affiliated through the University of Georgia and the job advertisement would be announced soon.

Paulita Bennet-Martin asked if the visitor center process would consider a location in the historic westside or eastside of Savannah in order to better serve the various communities around the city. Rogers responded by stating west side Savannah redevelopment projects are factored into the location decision. The visitor center is expected to have education components for groups and a storefront to raise donations for the Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary Foundation.

Advisory Council Permanent Meeting Time and Schedule - Michael Denmark proposed establishing a permanent meeting time and schedule for council meetings, proposing the third Thursday of April and third Thursday of October annually.

Peter Auster considered potential conflicts with the Science Advisory Group (SAG) meeting around that same time of the year. Auster suggested an earlier spring meeting time due to summer research cruise schedules and need for earlier planning. Kimberly Roberson suggested that much of the science advisory group planning can be done beforehand and to utilize the SAG call as a way to finalize planning. Stan Rogers asked to consider this type of planning for other advisory council working groups with the suspension of in-person meetings due to COVID-19. Roberson reiterated that the SAG

could plan their schedule without the use of video conferences or meetings to achieve their goal. Denmark concluded the conversation that the next advisory council meeting will be the third Thursday in April, 15 April 2021.

## **Action Plan Updates**

Joseph Glenn: Mooring Buoy Report - Joseph Glenn gave an update on progress of the proposed Mooring Buoy Program and COVID-19 impacts. Glenn gave an overview of phase 1, presented last meeting. Phase 1 includes; description of mooring buoy, use of mooring buoys, and diver and fishermen interest. Glenn displayed a video on how to tie up to the mooring buoy. Glenn described Phase 2, which focuses on details of permitting: how the permit money would be spent and annual cost of permits. Glenn detailed the application process and the application information being used to inform sanctuary usage. Questions arose about who would enforce buoy permits. Glenn discussed potential Right Whale interaction with mooring buoys. Glenn asked who would be liable for the buoys. Glenn asked for approval to move on to Phase 3 of the mooring buoy project. Floor opened for questions.

Sanctuary Superintendent Stan Rogers asked Glenn to clarify if he was proposing a privately owned and operated mooring buoy system, Glenn responded, yes. Rogers said he would review sanctuary regulations vis-a-vis the proposed mooring buoy system to assess compliance and enforcement aspects. Rogers is unsure if the mooring buoy system can be privately owned and operated due to the sanctuary being a public resource. Glenn asked how to determine who would be liable for the mooring buoy system. Michael Denmark expressed that he didn't know exactly who would be liable. Capt. Mark Carson (Georgia Department of Natural Resources, GA DNR) suggested working with a law enforcement working group to go over liabilities and permits and working with DNR for enforcement since they enforce on behalf of NOAA. Kim Roberson confirmed she put Joseph in touch with Ben Hughes (NOAA Law Enforcement) about enforcement and liability.

Stan Rogers noted that compliance is a challenge and suggested that Glenn work on structuring compliance and penalties and build in flexibility to account for right whale movement. When Glenn asked if anyone with the U.S Coast Guard was on the call, Lt. Corbett responded. When asked if the mooring buoys need to be lighted, Lt Corbett responded she needed to check with another department. Paulita Bennett-Martin gave feedback that she's seen variations of mooring buoy systems and gave support for the system. Rick DeVictor suggested talking to the NOAA Office of Protected Resources that work with right whales to mitigate interactions and to think about engaging the public like they do about fishing ideas. Michael Denmark, speaking as a citizen-at-large representative to the AC, said he's not aware of any marine sanctuaries that have privatized mooring buoy systems. Denmark expressed concern about privatizing mooring buoy systems in national marine sanctuaries and suggested it be open to the public with options for single day permits for infrequent users. DeVictor asked for clarification of phase 3 and Glenn responded that it includes further research of issues such as enforcement, lighting, and liability. DeVictor suggested further research and

reconvening in April for further discussions. Peter Auster suggested that NOAA general counsel review the issue of a private vs. public mooring buoy system within GRNMS. Stan Rogers suggested the council vote to go to phase 3 and propose three different scenarios of privately owned and operated, publicly owned and operated, and some combination thereof. Denmark suggested greater likelihood of success if the mooring buoy system were similar to other sanctuaries to avoid excess scrutiny. When Glenn asked if there is another way other than privatization or a middle ground, Rogers responds it is both doable on the private side or government side and gave different scenarios and attendant considerations for each. DeVictor supported Glenn doing more work on the project, moving to Phase 3, and leading another discussion at the meeting in April. Robert Crimian suggested reservations for buoys and other ideas for Phase 3 exploration. Crimian also suggested starting with one buoy before investing in 4 total to see how it works out. Glenn was interested in starting out with the day-pass idea to avoid users getting out to the reef and finding someone else already tied to the buoy. Denmark asked if anyone objected to Glenn going into Phase 3 and meeting up and dialoguing with different agencies to present at the next meeting in April. Denmark told Glenn to move forward with research on the mooring buoy project and to look into Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary's process and experience with their mooring buoy system.

A late morning break was taken from 11:50 to 12:00.

Lauren Stefaniak University Education Internet Teaching - Lauren Stefaniak delivered a presentation about her creative use of GRNMS benthic invertebrate survey data to provide experiential learning to students conducting remote/online learning. Over the past 20 years, university biological courses have shifted away from memorization-based teaching to experiential learning. Incorporation of experiential learning keeps students engaged by investigating meaningful real-world research questions and increases retention of students to graduate with their science degree. While teaching online in Spring 2020, Stefaniak found that there is a lack of strong marine biology labs available online. She presented the lab she created to demonstrate the call for more easily accessed marine datasets, supporting method descriptions and images. Based on her experience, Stefaniak found these three components could prove very useful for instructors at the university level to engage students both in person and online.

Stefaniak utilized the datasets from Daniel Gleason's benthic invertebrate species and abundance research to create a diversity lab for her marine biology students. Data was scaled down to a manageable size for students to work with, 4 survey sites. The first step of this lesson plan was to introduce the concepts of benthic invertebrate diversity, species richness, evenness and ways to calculate data into meaningful statistics. Part two of this module provided background information about Gray's Reef, giving students a sense of place (location, reef images, vertebrates that frequent the ledges, etc.). Finally, Stefaniak provided information about the specific data they would be using, including where, when, why and how the data was collected, with supporting maps and images. Stefaniak created tutorial videos in Excel for students to reference and templates for organizing and analyzing the data. The students compared diversity

indices between ledges of different sizes, applying the techniques they had learned throughout the semester.

Stefaniak went on to explain that the benefits of sharing the materials as described above is two-fold: it improves the quality of higher education in the field of marine biology, as well as increasing exposure to Gray's Reef across the nation. So far, Stefaniak has experienced positive feedback from students and other faculty that have adopted her lesson plan.

Suggestions on materials GRNMS and collaborating scientists could share included:

- An introduction document for faculty that is easy to locate on the GRNMS webpage
- Datasets that are easy to use and adapted to faculty-specific lesson plans
- Datasets that are already published with a description of methods, along with visuals

Stefaniak suggested promoting this on the GRNMS website specifically as appropriate for university level coursework. Word of mouth, social media, and promotion through discipline specific professional societies could be good first steps to get this project rolling.

Discussion started with a question from Stan Rogers asking, how would we be able to scale this up to a national or at least regional scale? Could we promote it through Georgia Sea Grant? Can we get it mainstream? Stefaniak responded that if the activities are provided as complete entities it would help them become more mainstream. She also suggested these complete activities could be added to online learning websites such as Labster or Khan Academy. Stefaniak emphasized starting small to get materials out quickly and making this available nationally would take more time for development.

Peter Auster suggested getting multiple sanctuaries participating for nation-wide education. Mona Behl asked for Stefaniak's suggestions on how to cross pollinate great science with great teaching. Stefaniak has seen success in asking scientific authors of course-assigned readings to engage classes through video conferencing and speak with the students.

Michael Denmark asked for clarification whether this is "off the shelf" ready. Stefaniak explained that each university seems to use a different online learning platform, so the likelihood that it can be "plug and play" is low. It would be best to have all of the pieces available for instructors so that they can put it together within their respective learning formats.

Michelle Riley noted there is public relations potential for this endeavor and asked if elements of the course could be adapted for high-school students. Riley envisioned this initiative being promoted through the Discovery Channel, PBS, and Georgia Public Radio.

Monique Gordan expressed excitement about the potential for use of the course in high-school settings as well. She planned to contact Lauren to learn more. Gordon emphasized the necessity to educate teachers as well as students.

A PDF of this activity was provided to Michael Denmark for sharing with interested parties.

## **Council Member Reports**

SAC Diversity Recruitment – Denmark stated this topic would be tabled until next meeting with an extended time allotted for Paulita Bennett-Martin and Mona Behl to present on the topic. He recognized the topic as a critical factor for the long-term well-being of the council and wanted it to be given the time and discussion it deserves.

Ecotourism – Mark Padgett was not in attendance but asked Michael Denmark to relay his thoughts at the meeting. During his coastal tours, Padgett has been able to weave-in the connection between inshore and offshore ecosystem health. Using the knowledge obtained from Daniel Gleason and Risa Cohen’s connectivity dye project, he segues from coastal information to an introduction of Gray’s Reef. Padgett’s idea is to share information about GRNMS to other ecotourism tour operators in the area. He would like to have pamphlets that could be handed out during his tours to help describe Gray’s Reef.

Recreational fishing outreach – Two fishing educational events were held in Spring 2020. Robert Crimian reported on their efforts to create an online platform for recreational fishing education. This program is led by The Nature Conservancy in partnership with the GA DNR, UGA Marine Extension, Sea Grant, and South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. They are working with a contracting developer to create a webpage housed on the GRNMS website with dynamic modules catered specifically for fisherman that are newcomers to the Georgia Coast and Gray’s Reef.

The webpage will include three modules 1) a fishing map to educate about the reef structure and species present, 2) best fishing practices, and 3) short video testimonies from fishermen that frequently visit Gray’s. Completion is projected for February or March 2021. A press release, social media and list-serv announcements will be used for promotion. Funding for the project is provided by the Gray’s Reef National Marine Sanctuary Foundation.

Law enforcement – The Joint Enforcement Agreement between NOAA and the Georgia DNR has been signed. Two trips were made out to GRNMS in September. On one of the trips, 4 vessels were present with 8 people total aboard the vessels. Two boats were found anchored in September. The first was a recreational fisherman. The second was a charter boat found with his second offense of being both anchored and with undersized seabass onboard. Both incidents were referred to NOAA Office of Law Enforcement for further investigation and action. Mark Carson noted that during hunting

season their workforce is spread out, but they try to get out to Gray's Reef whenever possible.

Science Group – Peter Auster reported that there have been three science strategies identified for the council action plan

1. To communicate the importance of following through with data analysis for publications.
2. To make the existence of the research area report known. Its purpose is to be a resource for scientists who are interested in GRNMS, so it should be easily found.
3. To promote the need for applied research projects that go beyond the annual research cruise.

Engaging younger faculty may be a good way to do this since they are usually actively searching for grants, meaningful projects, and publications.

Auster informed everyone that the research plan is in progress and feedback from the Science Advisory Group is on its way. The Connectivity Working Group is still active with plans to virtually reconnect and move forward soon.

Auster spoke as a panelist at the congressional briefing organized by the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation and Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. Peter emphasized the education and research value of National Marine Sanctuaries beyond their direct economic benefit. He also emphasized the importance of adequate small boat fleets to facilitate critical academic research in National Marine Sanctuaries.

pCO<sub>2</sub> Buoy and Platform – Scott Noakes was offshore on Friday, October 16<sup>th</sup> on Kevin Hunnicutt's Latitude 31 boat. Noakes vouched for this vessel as appropriate for contracting offshore. During this trip to Gray's Reef, Noakes picked up the instruments from the ocean acidification seafloor platform and worked on the data buoy.

Future amendments to seats within SAC – Denmark asked for initial ideas for new seat positions on the sanctuary advisory council. He asked that council members continue brainstorming for further discussion during the next meeting. Denmark said evaluating SAC seats is an opportunity to reflect on proper representation of stakeholders that should be involved in national marine sanctuary management. Two examples Denmark provided were possibly including the shipping or tourism industry. Bennett-Martin suggested a Gullah Geechee community rep (cultural importance) and a youth representative (young ocean stewards). Rogers pointed out the broader context of the community we reside in, that we must think about why GRNMS would matter to them. For example, we should engage inland communities. Peter emphasized the national designation of NMS and that stakeholders should be thought of as more than just direct users.

More time will be devoted to this discussion at the next SAC meeting.



## **SAC Role in Condition Report and Timeline for FY 2021**

Rogers reported on the plans for FY 2021 and the steps needed to draft the next sanctuary condition report. Rogers emphasized the importance of an energized advisory council, active in the management process. The condition report is an 18-24 month process and many of the staff will be learning along the way. Rogers hopes the staff can look to long standing SAC members for insight during this process.

The purpose of a sanctuary condition report is to assess the conditions and trends of NMS resources and serve as a tool for researchers, policy makers, educators, and resource managers. The assessment is based on a set of 16 questions related to human activities, water quality, habitat, living resources, and maritime heritage along with a set of status ratings. Information should be compiled to answer these questions and identify what may need to be changed or addressed in the future of the sanctuary.

Rogers requested that SAC members be a part of this process because SAC initiatives (e.g. Connectivity Working Group) will be involved in the condition report discussions. In FY21, training will be held for GRNMS staff, SAC members and other stakeholders. In FY22, condition report workshops will be held to draft the report. The GRNMS Condition Report should be finalized by FY23 and a review of the management plan will begin.

Dovetailing the theme of many of the topics in today's meeting, Rogers encouraged everyone to think about the broader scope of Gray's Reef's impact. GRNMS is a key area to the South Atlantic Bight, including the coastline of multiple states that should be included in either the discussion, or in the least, be well informed for the condition report.

Denmark rounded out the discussion stating that the Sanctuary Condition Report is one of the important responsibilities of the advisory council.

## **Other business**

Fisheries Report – Rick DeVictor stated NOAA experts are now looking into the impacts on fishing and charter boats from COVID-19. Though charter boats may have seen less activity, there appeared to be an increase in personal recreation. During COVID related shutdowns, the fisheries council allowed for a 180-day emergency action where they increased mackerel and snapper limits. This action has now since expired. A four-day recreation season for red snapper was held this summer and limits were surpassed, therefore it will not be reopening for this season. A stock assessment will be coming soon.

DeVictor reported new regulations are in place for descending devices and catch reports. As of July 15<sup>th</sup>, every boat is now required to have descending devices readily available if fishing for snapper. DeVictor noted, that this will take some time to become common place while word gets out and more bait and tackle shops start carrying descending devices for sale. On January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021 boat captains who have any one of three charter permits will be required to submit electronic log books once a week. Logs

will ask for information such as, species caught, locations, and fuel use. Informational packets will be distributed to instruct fisherman how to fill out the logs.

## **Public Comment**

1<sup>st</sup> public comment posted through the chat function stated “Thank you, very interesting. Joseph as you do your research please consider daily passes and reservations for boaters if you are able to implement this wonderful idea. I have to sign off.”

2<sup>nd</sup> public comment, Jody Patterson (Gray’s Reef National Marine Sanctuary Foundation) wanted to commend Lauren Stefaniak for her educational work. Patterson went on to share that the Gray’s Reef chapter of the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation is working on making soundscapes available for educational use based on NOAA datasets. They will also be creating video tutorials about how to use acoustic data for education and citizen science application with the Ravenlite software.

Patterson’s update also included the Foundation’s plans to hold the ROV competition in April 2021. It will likely take the form of an online/in-person hybrid format. Additionally, Patterson reminded SAC of the Foundation’s national platform that is available for promoting projects now and in the future.

3<sup>rd</sup> public comment, Glenn forwarded an inquiry from a member of the public about the need for diver volunteers at the ROV competition. Patterson responded that NOAA divers may be unable to provide support this year for the event, so volunteer divers might be needed.

Additionally, Glenn reported seeing juvenile lionfish on the reef while diving with a group. Joseph asked if there may be a possibility for him to be designated as a volunteer to remove these lionfish using a small spear gun in the future.

Rogers responded that there has been discussion of creating specific outings for removing lionfish or setting lionfish traps that could be collected by volunteers. He stated opening up use of non-approved gear, such as spear guns, for the public to remove lionfish would need to be addressed in the management plan. It needs to be determined if the presence of lionfish justifies the encouragement of aggressive removal of individuals.

Glenn clarified he was proposing the designation of key individuals approved for lionfish removal when on the reef for recreational reasons. Rogers responded that is a possibility, but the designation of volunteers and start of a volunteer program would need to be discussed and designed.

Noakes reported the sighting of two juvenile lionfish at the pCO<sub>2</sub> monitoring platform, which leads him to believe there would be more at nearby ledges. Noakes was able to remove them by trapping both in a gear bag and cutting in half.

Bennett-Martin sent a question in the chat function asking about the possibility of a lionfish derby.

Roberson recited the statistics of lionfish sightings: between 2012 and 2017, 88 lionfish were seen and 54 of them successfully removed. Roberson expressed her doubt that something like a lionfish derby would be successful due to the spotty distribution of lionfish presently recorded. Surveys completed in the summers with Roldan Muñoz saw very few lionfish. Summer surveys have stronger catch per unit effort.

Bennett-Martin responded through the chat function "That makes sense! Thanks Kim. My pals working on the Gittings traps and other LF tools have asked me how they can partner with us on LF stuff in Gray's. Sounds like it is not enough to get excited over. None the less maybe you would like to meet some of my old LF team sometime if it warrants culling".

Rogers said training would need to be completed in order for volunteers to use approved gear. If spear guns are not currently approved, then regulations may need to be changed.

DeVictor added spear fishing is allowed as a recreational fishing use in the southeast. So, the regulations would just need to be assessed within the sanctuary.

### **Next Meeting**

The next meeting is planned for April 15, 2021.

### **Closing Remarks**

Denmark ended the meeting by thanking SAC for their efforts staying strong and productive even through the pandemic. Meeting Adjourned at 14:07