



**NOAA
FISHERIES**

NOAA Fisheries Protected Resources

Strategic Plan: 2016 - 2020

Conserving America's Marine Protected Species

August 2016





Our Mission

The Office of Protected Resources recovers and conserves protected resources through our actions to reduce threats to species and enhance species' health based on our expertise in science-based policy and management. We accomplish this mission in collaboration with our Regional Offices, Science Centers, and partners.

NOAA Fisheries Protected Resources Strategic Plan: 2016 - 2020

August 2016

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service

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Introduction

The mission of the Office of Protected Resources is to recover and conserve marine and anadromous species protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). This strategic plan will help the Office of Protected Resources focus on the actions and investments that have the greatest conservation value for species under our purview and for which we are best positioned and capable of accomplishing. This strategic plan will serve as the guidepost for the Office of Protected Resources for fiscal years 2016 through 2020. It will further guide internal decision-making, priority-setting, and discretionary resource allocation with the assumption that funding will remain level.

This plan provides national-level strategic goals for the protected species management programs across National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries (this includes Protected Resources Divisions in NOAA Fisheries’ five Regional Offices), as well as strategic goals specific to the NOAA Fisheries Headquarters Office of Protected Resources. We developed these priorities in consideration of the Office of Protected Resources’ core mission in the context of current fiscal conditions and NOAA Fisheries, NOAA, and Department of Commerce (DOC) strategic plans and priorities which are highlighted in Table 1 and further described in Appendix 1. Our priorities are driven by and focused on the needs of the species and stakeholders.

In supporting these goals and mandates, and in carrying out our plan, we will use the best available scientific and other information and will strive for an excellent organization that practices outstanding customer service and responsiveness, fiscal integrity, strong and diverse partnerships, innovative solutions, and internal program and policy alignment. Our success will be accomplished by our highly trained and professional workforce that is dedicated to our mission to recover and conserve protected resources.

DOC Environmental Goal
Ensure communities and businesses have the necessary information, products, and services to prepare for and prosper in a changing environment.
NOAA Vision and Healthy Oceans Goal
Vision: Healthy ecosystems, communities, and economies that are resilient in the face of change.
Goal: Marine fisheries, habitats, and biodiversity sustained within healthy and productive ecosystems.
NOAA Fisheries Core Mandate
Recover and conserve protected resources through the use of sound natural and social sciences and compliance with regulations.
Ensure the productivity and sustainability of fisheries and fishing communities through science-based decision-making and compliance with regulations.

Table 1: Primary DOC, NOAA, and NOAA Fisheries goals and mandates that guide the Office of Protected Resources Strategic Plan

Statutory Authority

Over 40 years ago, Congress and the American public pledged to recover species that are facing extinction and protect marine mammals through passage of the ESA and the MMPA, respectively. Through these Acts, Congress provided the Nation with an enduring commitment to species recovery and conservation.

Under the authority of these two statutes, NOAA Fisheries is responsible for the stewardship of marine mammals and marine and anadromous species, listed as threatened or endangered, living within the 3.4 million square nautical miles of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone and on the high seas, as well as the vast rivers and estuaries of the United States.

The ESA: Congress passed the ESA in 1973, recognizing that the natural heritage of the United States was of “esthetic, ecological, educational, recreational, and scientific value to our Nation and its people.” It was understood that, without protection, many of our Nation’s living resources would become extinct. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries share responsibility for implementing the ESA. The ESA provides for the conservation of species that are endangered or threatened throughout all or a significant portion of their range, and the conservation of the ecosystems on which they depend. Recovery is the process of restoring listed species and their ecosystems to the point they no longer require the protections of the ESA. Recovery actions are the specific actions that are needed to reduce threats to the species. Such actions might include research and monitoring, limiting direct or incidental take¹, and habitat protection and restoration. NOAA Fisheries is charged with recovering over 125 marine species as threatened or endangered. For a full list of the species NOAA Fisheries protects, go to www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pr/species.

The MMPA: The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 was enacted in response to increasing concerns among scientists and the public that significant declines in some species of marine mammals were caused by human activities. The Act established a national policy to prevent marine mammal species and population stocks from declining beyond the point where they ceased to be significant functioning elements of the ecosystems of which they are a part. The MMPA established a moratorium on the taking² of marine mammals in U.S. waters. Exceptions to the moratorium can be made through permitting actions for take incidental to commercial fishing and other non-fishing activities; for

¹ Take is defined under the ESA as “to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct.”

² Take is defined under the MMPA as “to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal” (16 U.S.C. 1362) and further defined by regulation (50 CFR 216.3) as “to harass, hunt, capture, collect, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, collect, or kill any marine mammal.”

scientific research; and for public display at licensed institutions such as aquaria and scientific institutions. The MMPA contains provisions allowing Alaska natives to take marine mammals for subsistence use or to create and sell “authentic articles of handicrafts and clothing” without permits or authorizations. NOAA Fisheries is charged with protecting 117 species of whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals, and sea lions. For a full list of the marine mammal species NOAA Fisheries protects, go to www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pr/species.

These species are critical to the sustainability and health of our marine, estuarine, and riverine ecosystems and the resiliency of our coastal communities that depend on them. Our continued enjoyment of all the benefits provided by these valuable, but vulnerable, living resources and their habitats depends on our collective efforts to understand and conserve them under the ESA and the MMPA.



Leatherback Sea Turtle, Photo Credit: Scott Benson/NOAA

Challenges to Meeting the Requirements of the ESA and MMPA

As we work to recover and conserve marine species, we are challenged by many factors, including:

Mounting expectations: The number of species listed under the ESA is increasing, which results in an increase in NOAA Fisheries workload to fulfill statutory requirements. Also, requests for our services under the ESA and MMPA are becoming more demanding and complex, so individual actions (i.e., consultations, permits) require more of our time and effort to complete.

Constrained budgets: Federal budgets are remaining stable or declining, making it increasingly difficult for NOAA Fisheries to carry out meaningful conservation and recovery activities.

Changing environment: Climate-related changes are affecting the nation's living marine resources. From warming oceans and rising seas, to droughts and ocean acidification, the results of continued changes in the planet's climate system will likely lead to profound effects on marine and anadromous protected species and their habitats. Resource managers are frequently called upon to make decisions in the face of uncertain information on any number of issues, and NOAA Fisheries is adept at doing so. A changing climate further complicates the conservation of protected resources, due in large part to the uncertainty of the rate and magnitude of climate-related changes and the response of various organisms to those changes.

Increasing human activities: Threats to protected species from human activities such as bycatch in fisheries, ocean noise, and habitat destruction continue to increase in scale and complexity, challenging our ability to mitigate the threats and prevent declines in protected species populations.

Time to recover: Recovery of threatened, endangered, or depleted protected species is a gradual process and it may take decades to fully mitigate the threats that led to the population declines of these species. While we may see progress in reducing threats, it may still take decades for the populations to respond to improved conditions in their environment, warranting a sustained effort over many years to address recovery actions.

To achieve our mission in the face of these challenges, we must:

- Prioritize efforts to deliver the greatest conservation value over the long term, to ensure our limited resources have the greatest impact
- Develop policies and innovative tools to help managers effectively implement recovery actions to minimize or eliminate the increasing threats to species recovery
- Improve operational processes and information management to more cost-effectively meet our mandates
- Enhance our collaborations within NOAA and with organizations external to the agency to develop better tools, leverage resources, and engage diverse expertise to overcome these challenges

Office of Protected Resources Role and Expertise

The Office of Protected Resources has two overarching roles. One is to provide leadership through national guidance and policy, as well as strategic programmatic and budgetary planning, for protected resources programs carried out at the regional and headquarters levels (i.e., the national protected resources program). In this role, we:

- Guide the strategic direction of NOAA Fisheries national protected resources program to effectively meet our mission
- Lead policy, guidance, and tool development for NOAA Fisheries implementation of the ESA and MMPA
- Develop standards of national consistency for all major protected resources program activities
- Foster national information sharing and advocate for protected resources science needs
- Advocate for the national program and regional needs to achieve protected resources program objectives
- Develop and support metrics to measure and track organizational progress and success
- Ensure regulatory and management needs are clearly described to inform science priorities
- Catalyze innovation to achieve species recovery and conservation

The other role of the Office of Protected Resources is to implement specific programs that span regional boundaries, some of which are national or international in scope. In this role, among other things, we:

- Conduct ESA status reviews and make ESA listing determinations
- Designate critical habitat
- Develop and implement ESA recovery plans for globally-listed species
- Conduct ESA Section 7 consultations
- Coordinate the annual development of Stock Assessment Reports under the MMPA
- Coordinate the administration of the MMPA Scientific Review Groups
- Provide ESA and MMPA incidental take authorizations and authorize or permit non-salmonid scientific research
- Coordinate programs that reduce fishing impacts on protected resources, such as the Take Reduction Program
- Manage the ESA Section 6 Cooperation with States program and administer the Species Recovery Grants to states and tribes programs
- Oversee the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program
- Provide leadership on international multi-lateral environmental agreements, such as the Convention in International Trade on Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) and the InterAmerican Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles

Appendix B includes a detailed description of the activities of each Office of Protected Resources division as well as their products and services.

Our Core Principles

The Office of Protected Resources operates based on a set of key principles and tenets. We have a highly trained and professional workforce that is dedicated to our mission to recover and conserve protected resources. We will strive to continually improve how we serve the public and the species they've entrusted to us by adhering to the following core principles:

- Recovery and conservation of protected resources is our fundamental mission
- Excellence in programs and practices is our public service duty
- Science-based decision-making is a core responsibility
- The American public is our most important customer
- A highly trained and diverse workforce is our greatest asset
- A collaborative approach to engage partners in solving conservation problems is key to success



Southern Resident Killer Whale, Photo Credit: Candice Emmons/NOAA

Partnering Across NOAA

We coordinate with other NOAA offices to maximize resources and provide expertise to address complex ecosystem and management issues affecting protected species. We work closely with our counterparts in the NOAA Fisheries Regional Offices in developing policy and guidance and in implementing the ESA and MMPA. We rely on the NOAA Fisheries' Office of Science and Technology and Science Centers to provide top quality scientific information on marine and anadromous species and their ecosystems. We also work closely with:

- The Office of Sustainable Fisheries and Regional Offices to reduce fishing impacts on protected resources
- The Office of International Affairs and Seafood Inspection on international agreements to protect our species
- The Office of Habitat Conservation to restore and conserve habitat for protected species
- The Office of Law Enforcement to ensure compliance with ESA and MMPA regulations

We also work collaboratively with other NOAA programs that have missions that overlap with protected resources conservation and recovery, such as the National Ocean Service's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and the Coral Reef Conservation Program.



Atlantic Sturgeon, Photo Credit: University of Georgia

Key External Partners and Stakeholders

We cannot succeed in our mission without the support of partners and stakeholders. Partners provide a range of vital resources, expertise, data, and even funding for activities to make important progress on recovery and conservation. Key to our protected species management success is working alongside:

Other Federal Partners: At both the national and regional scales, we work with other Federal partners to meet our shared mandates under the ESA and MMPA. In particular, we co-manage several species under the ESA with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (e.g., marine turtles, Gulf sturgeon, Atlantic salmon) and coordinate closely to ensure common approaches to implementing the ESA. We also work closely with the Marine

Mammal Commission, who oversees our implementation of the MMPA and relevant provisions of the ESA, and with the Fishery Management Councils, who are responsible for development of fishery management plans and engage in addressing interactions between protected species and fisheries in the course of fulfilling their management responsibilities.



Spotted Seal, Photo Credit: D. Withrow/NOAA (NOAA Fisheries Permit 19309)

Tribal and State Agencies: We share management authority and responsibilities for listed species with states and tribes—most of our protected species live in state waters and rivers. We rely on state partners for assistance with research, status reviews, and recovery planning. Funding is available to states and tribes to implement high-priority recovery actions through the Species Recovery Grants program.

Academic Institutions: We look to academic institutions for their expertise in species biology, recovery, and conservation and to provide membership on technical working groups and advisory bodies as we implement the ESA and MMPA.

Non-Governmental Organizations: We work with non-governmental organizations to identify key resources and innovative approaches to recover and conserve protected species, including relying upon them for marine mammal and sea turtle stranding and entanglement response, among other things.

Private Sector: We partner with private companies to implement recovery actions, including commercial and recreational fisheries, the aquaculture industry, the whale watching industry, and oil and gas companies.

These partners and the American public help us maintain the conservation promises made over 40 years ago with the passage of the ESA and MMPA. For a list of key partner organizations, see Appendix C.

Overview of the Strategic Plan

Over the next five years we will focus on four strategic goals. The goals align with and take advantage of our strengths and unique capabilities, guiding the work of Office of Protected Resources and the NOAA Fisheries protected resources management programs around the country (this includes Protected Resources Divisions in NOAA Fisheries’ five Regional Offices).

We have determined our focus on these goals will make the biggest difference to our recovery and conservation mission given our expertise and current and emerging needs. The four goals are:

1. Stabilize the most critically endangered species and improve populations of those species nearing recovery
2. Develop guidelines and tools to make protected species management decisions “Climate Smart”
3. Maximize our effectiveness in implementing the ESA and MMPA
4. Cultivate collaborators to recover and conserve protected species

Goals
A statement of aim or purpose articulating what we need to achieve to advance our mission.
Objectives
More detailed statements of the outcomes or management impact we are trying to achieve with each goal. These objectives will help us prioritize, manage, and evaluate our activities.
Strategies
Approaches we will take to accomplish the objectives. Each year we will create plans with milestones to identify specific actions to carry out the strategies.

Table 2: Definition of Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

The first two goals provide strategic direction to all of NOAA Fisheries’ protected resources management programs nationwide. These two goals focus on issues that are integral to our success nationally and which will rely upon cooperation among various NOAA Fisheries entities. The third and fourth goals focus on issues that are specific to the work of the Office of Protected Resources in NOAA Fisheries Headquarters.

The four goals have corresponding objectives against which we will measure progress. Under each objective, we identified several strategies to describe more specifically what we will strive to achieve. We will accomplish these goals in collaboration with other NOAA Fisheries’ Headquarters Offices, Regions, and Science Centers. An implementation plan will provide specific tasks and milestones needed to accomplish the goals of this strategic plan and will be reviewed annually to monitor progress.

National Protected Resources Goals

The first two national goals, regarding species recovery and climate smart conservation and management, provide strategic direction to all of NOAA Fisheries' protected resources management programs and will help us prioritize our investments to deliver the greatest conservation value over the long term.

Goal 1—Stabilize the most critically endangered species and improve populations of those species nearing recovery

As we begin the fifth decade of administering the ESA, we are rededicating ourselves to species recovery and ensuring we do not lose any species to the threat of extinction. The ESA has been successful in preventing species extinctions—less than 1 percent of the species listed under the ESA have become extinct. While only a small percentage of listed species are considered recovered, we would likely have seen many species go extinct without efforts required by the ESA.

This goal focuses NOAA Fisheries' protected species recovery and conservation efforts over the next five years on species on two opposite ends of the endangered species spectrum—species that need immediate efforts to prevent extinction as well as species with stable or growing populations that, with some concerted effort, may be candidates for removal from the Endangered and Threatened Species List. We call this the *Species in the Spotlight* initiative. We are undertaking a focused strategy to marshal the resources available within NOAA and engaging our existing and new partners and their expertise to target the most important recovery actions for these species.



Atlantic Salmon, Photo Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

This goal will guide agency actions to make critical investments that safeguard the most endangered species and provide the final catalyst for recovery of those species with healthy population levels. This goal will not, however, divert resources away from the important and continued efforts that support all listed species under our authority. For example, many of our species have long-standing conservation programs supported by multiple partners. We remain committed to those programs and will use the objectives within this goal to augment these and other ongoing efforts.

The first objective of this goal, *Survive to Thrive*, is to prevent extinction of critically endangered species, by slowing, halting, or reversing their rates of population decline. NOAA Fisheries' ESA Biennial Report to Congress for 2012–2014 highlighted this list of *Species in the Spotlight* based on the following criteria: these species are all listed as endangered, their populations are continuing to decline, the best available information points to their extinction, if action is not taken. In addition, we understand many of the limiting factors and threats facing the species and we know the management actions that will have a high probability of success. These characteristics set this list of species apart from others.

The second objective of this goal is to focus efforts to improve the status of species with stable or growing populations so that they can be considered for downlisting from endangered to threatened, or delisting under the ESA. Under this objective, *Recovery Ready*, we will also evaluate our recovery program to determine what improvements can be implemented to ensure that we are learning from previous efforts and making the most of limited resources for species recovery.



Atlantic Salmon Gulf of Maine
Distinct Population Segment
(DPS)

Central California Coast Coho
Evolutionarily Significant Unit
(ESU)

Cook Inlet Beluga Whale DPS

Hawaiian Monk Seal

Pacific Leatherback Sea Turtle

Sacramento River Winter-run
Chinook ESU

Southern Resident Killer Whale
DPS

White Abalone

Objective 1: Make measurable improvements to reduce threats and stabilize the declines of eight critically endangered species. (Species in the Spotlight – Survive to Thrive)

Strategies

- Develop and carry out five-year action plans for each of the eight species, targeting a few key actions necessary to reduce threats and stabilize population declines of these species in the long-term.
- Educate the public about the recovery needs of the eight species and about how they can help.
- Partner with Federal, state, and local agencies, non-governmental organizations, tribes, academic institutions, and the public to leverage resources to help implement recovery actions in the five-year action plans.

Objective 2: Make measurable improvements to reduce threats and increase populations of species making recovery progress. (Species in the Spotlight – Recovery Ready)

Strategies

- Evaluate the current NOAA Fisheries recovery program to determine how the recovery planning and implementation process can result in greater progress towards meeting recovery goals.
- Apply and refine the recommendations provided in the ESA Recovery Program Review to support recovery progress.
- Leverage resources to increase populations of species making recovery progress whose recovery needs are known and can be addressed.



Example of Recovery Progress

The eastern distinct population segment of Steller sea lions, listed as threatened under the ESA almost a quarter century ago, was removed from the Endangered Species List because of its successful recovery. The delisting of this population of Steller sea lions—which was once depleted due to harvests, predator control programs, and indiscriminate killing—demonstrates that species can recover with targeted conservation efforts.

Steller Sea Lions, Photo Credit: Vladimir Burkanov/NOAA

Goal 2—Develop guidelines and tools to make protected species management decisions “Climate Smart”

When the ESA was written, climate change was not a widely recognized issue. Since that time climate change has become a key lens through which resource management decisions must be evaluated and addressed. Over the past several years, NOAA Fisheries staff have been working to develop standard approaches for incorporating climate change related information into agency decisions. The courts have affirmed the importance of considering climate change in determinations and decisions under the ESA despite the uncertainty that makes predicting specific impacts from climate change challenging. Recent changes in climate and ocean conditions are well documented and are predicted to continue.

As the global ocean waters become warmer and more acidic, the likelihood increases for profound effects on marine and anadromous protected species and their habitats. In marine systems, climate change impacts extend beyond changes in temperature and precipitation to include changes in pH, ocean currents, loss of sea ice, and sea level rise among other factors. Climate smart conservation means enhancing resilience of protected species to climate-related changes using the best available science to make more informed management decisions. Efforts to understand the



Elkhorn Coral, Photo Credit: Michael Barnette/NOAA



effect of climate change on living marine resources and to strengthen NOAA's capacity to address the effects of climate change on NOAA's trust resources have been increasing over past years. To continue to fulfill our stewardship responsibility for marine and anadromous protected species, we need to adapt our management and conservation practices based on the best available scientific information regarding the effects of climate change on marine ecosystems and the species that depend on them. Although responses by marine species to effects of climate change are likely to be complex, we need to improve our ability to predict some likely outcomes for protected species, including, for example, shifts in distribution and habitat use. Ecological shifts may in turn influence such things as critical habitat determinations, the preparation of Biological Opinions, and related legal protection for affected populations/species. A memorandum was finalized in 2016 establishing a policy for treating climate change uncertainty in ESA actions. The strategies below will help clarify what steps need to be taken as we work with our partners to fill data gaps and ensure consistency in management decisions.

Objective 1: Identify and fill knowledge gaps of how climate change will affect protected species.

Strategies

- Develop a list of information needs regarding the effects of climate change on species, habitat, and ecosystems.
- Support analysis and research to build understanding of protected species vulnerability to climate change and how the distributions and abundance of protected species may change with a changing climate.
- Develop adaptation strategies to mitigate the impacts on protected species that will come from climate change.

Objective 2: Develop guidance and tools to inform ESA and MMPA actions in light of anticipated future climate conditions.

Strategies

- Develop and implement guidance on using adaptive management to address climate change uncertainties over time.
- Review internal guidance and project design criteria to ensure they are adequate for recovery and conservation in light of climate change.
- Provide guidance on incorporating climate change information and management strategies into ESA and MMPA actions.

Office of Protected Resources Goals

The next two goals, regarding statutory effectiveness and cultivating partnerships, provide strategic direction to NOAA Fisheries' Office of Protected Resources to continually improve the national leadership we provide, improve the impacts of program investments, and foster necessary collaborative partnerships.

Goal 3—Maximize our effectiveness in implementing the ESA and MMPA

The Office of Protected Resources has the expertise and national leadership to coordinate the development of innovative tools, guidance, and best practices; provide training; and coordinate ecosystem-level recovery partnerships to help managers address evolving threats and provide the highest level of conservation benefit and service to the American people. Our knowledge of the marine and anadromous species we manage, the threats they face, and what they need to recover continues to evolve. The species we manage are facing increasing pressures threatening survival and recovery (e.g., bycatch, increasing ocean noise, habitat loss), and our managers need innovative guidance, tools, and reliable approaches to ensure these species persist for future generations. While many recovery and conservation actions can be species specific, we also need to consider larger-scale ecosystem approaches to recovery.

The Office of Protected Resources strives to maximize conservation value of programs by making wise resource investments while being responsive, transparent, accountable, effective, and efficient in administrative processes (such as budget execution and timekeeping) and program efforts (such as developing best practices or completing ESA consultations on-time). We also need to focus on maintaining and building the technical skills of our highly trained and motivated staff. We must routinely strive to improve our organization to meet our mandates and our Nation's pledge to recover and conserve protected species.

Objective 1: Invest in programs and activities with the greatest conservation value.

Strategies

- Identify our highest priority conservation needs that we can affect, and mobilize expertise around those issues.
- Identify priority science needs to continue to inform the highest priority management actions.

Objective 2: Develop innovative tools, national guidance, and reliable approaches for ESA and MMPA implementation.

Strategies

- Develop guidance, policies, and regulations to clarify ESA and MMPA interpretation and application.
- Implement standardized methods for use in ESA and MMPA analyses.
- Develop analytical tools and processes to strengthen decision-making.

Objective 3: Leverage technology and engage employees to build the workforce of tomorrow.

Strategies

- Empower, enable, and encourage innovation, follow-through, and results.
- Integrate flexible, nimble, and strategic workforce planning to emphasize adaptability, continual learning, and self-motivation.
- Leverage technology, data, and automation to improve operations and provide employees the tools necessary to succeed.
- Support succession planning and career progression to build capacity and develop future leaders.

Objective 4: Eliminate redundancies, enhance integration, and leverage resources to gain efficiencies and maximize effective use of resources.

Strategies

- Implement best practices and operational efficiencies to improve timeliness of agency actions.
- Improve the transparency of analyses and decision making processes.
- Evaluate, improve, and reduce costs of office-wide operational and administrative support.
- Provide timely, accurate, and responsive service that addresses the diverse needs of our customers.



Guadalupe Fur Seal, Photo Credit: The Marine Mammal Center (NOAA Fisheries Permit 18786)

Goal 4—Cultivate collaborators to recover and conserve protected species

Government agencies alone cannot do all that is needed to recover and conserve protected species; we need to engage with all sectors of our society. The Office of Protected Resources will work to improve our relationships with partners, understand their objectives and expertise, provide them with information, and connect them with opportunities to support and contribute to marine and anadromous protected species recovery and conservation. Through this effort, we hope to enhance the effects of public and private recovery efforts.

We have learned over the last 40 years that to make progress on species recovery, we need partners, stakeholders, and the public working with us. This goal provides strategic direction to cultivate relationships within NOAA and with our external partners in order to achieve our national recovery and conservation goals more effectively.

The Office of Protected Resources has a unique role as advocate for species under the MMPA and ESA working with the public, industry, and government agencies. By cultivating a broad array of collaborators, we have:

- Access to scientific and technical expertise
- Interactive connections to the public through partners' educational and outreach capabilities
- A willing network working toward marine and anadromous species protection within our policy framework

We pledge to engage the passion, expertise, capacity, and resources of our current and potential partners to achieve our shared missions of recovery and conservation. Engagement implies a commitment of service through a partnership between NOAA and society based on reciprocity and shared goals, objectives, and resources. Implicit to engagement is a respect for each partner that involves listening, dialogue, understanding, and mutual support.

We will support NOAA offices, federal agencies, and state partners with the information they need to plan, make decisions, and accomplish their mission while preserving our natural legacy. By creating a culture of engagement and proactive conservation we support our partners' work, including assisting their development of the techniques and practices they need to support national protected species recovery and conservation goals. This support is particularly important to our partner federal agencies, which the ESA charges with conserving and recovering listed species as they implement their other statutory and regulatory responsibilities.



Smalltooth Sawfish, Photo Credit: NOAA

Objective 1: Create new, and reinforce existing, communication avenues to engage with our audiences and partners.

Strategies

- Improve, or develop new, mechanisms to communicate protected species recovery and conservation priorities to our partners.
- Develop a coalition of external organizations to develop and promote initiatives around recovery and conservation goals, such as the Species in the Spotlight campaign.
- Seek greater opportunities for engagement with wider audiences to better communicate shared accomplishments.
- Conduct outreach and training on ESA and MMPA processes, proactive conservation opportunities, and regulatory requirements.

Objective 2: Leverage where the missions of federal agencies, states, and partner organizations intersect with protected species recovery and conservation needs.

Strategies

- Identify where species' recovery and conservation needs intersect with the missions of other agencies and partners.
- Create forums where agencies and partners can engage early in research and project planning processes to develop win-win scenarios for species conservation and partner mission accomplishment.
- Clearly identify how partners can contribute to addressing the collective scientific needs for protected species recovery and conservation according to their mission and activities.

Objective 3: Use collaboration and community expertise to augment NOAA Fisheries Protected Resources programs and improve recovery and conservation outcomes for protected species.

Strategies

- Coordinate within NOAA and collaborate with other federal and state partners to develop frameworks and best practice guidelines to minimize human impacts on protected species.
- Coordinate within NOAA and collaborate with other federal and state partners to improve protected species assessment and monitoring.
- Develop guidance and tools to reduce harmful interactions between the public and protected species.
- Develop and provide tools to help stakeholders participate in species recovery and conservation actions.

Appendix A: Alignment with DOC and NOAA Strategic Goals and Objectives

NOAA Fisheries is a line office of NOAA, which is located within the DOC. The Office of Protected Resources Strategic Plan was informed by the strategic plans and planning documents of DOC, NOAA, and NOAA Fisheries:

- Department of Commerce Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2014–2018 (2014) (DoCSP)
- NOAA's Next – Generation Strategic Plan (2010) (NGSP)
- NOAA Annual Guidance Memorandum for 2016 (2015) (AGM)
- NOAA Fisheries Priorities and Annual Guidance for 2016 (2015) (APG)

Department of Commerce Strategic Plan (2014)

The Department is composed of 12 bureaus that work in five key areas: trade and investment, innovation, environment, data and operational excellence. NOAA furthers the Department's mission with strong stewardship of the ocean's resources that contributes more than \$250 billion each year to the Nation's economy. Specifically tied to the NOAA mission in the Department of Commerce Strategic Plan (2014) are the following goal, objective, and key strategies:

DOC Strategic Goal 3:

Ensure communities and businesses have the necessary information, products, and services to prepare for and prosper in a changing environment.

DOC Strategic Objective 3.4:

Foster healthy and sustainable marine resources, habitats, and ecosystems through improved management and partnerships (NOAA).

DOC Strategies for Objective 3.4:

- *Strengthen capabilities to assess and monitor fish and protected resources (NOAA).*
Ensuring sustainable populations of living marine resources is a key Departmental mandate. NOAA will increase the precision of stock assessments, performing more robust monitoring, and applying ecosystem-based management to ensure healthy, sustainable populations of living marine resources. NOAA will incorporate integrated biological, physical, and chemical data and ecosystem modeling into fish stock and protected species assessments. NOAA will also produce more advanced technologies for monitoring of living marine resources and ecosystems.

- *Improve recovery of listed species through innovative partnerships (NOAA).*
International, federal, state, local, tribal, and nongovernmental organizations play a role in conservation. NOAA will strengthen partnerships with these stakeholder groups to ensure greater collaboration toward the recovery and conservation of protected species in marine and coastal ecosystems. Greater collaboration will improve the development and implementation of effective recovery and conservation plans for marine mammals and endangered and threatened species.
- *Enhance place-based conservation (NOAA).*
Through its coastal management and place-based conservation programs, NOAA will expand protections at current sites, add protections at new sites, and work with public and private partners. This place-based approach will preserve the economic and environmental benefits of these special places to local communities. NOAA will implement efforts such as the Habitat Blueprint framework, which employs partnerships to improve habitat conditions for fisheries, and coastal and marine life, to achieve economic, cultural, and environmental benefits.

NOAA's The Next Generation Strategic Plan (NGSP)

The NGSP (2010) conveys NOAA's mission and future vision, as well as the road map for achieving the vision as laid out through the long term goals, and objectives. With the release in 2010 of the Plan and Executive Summary, and in the 2013 Addendum, Dr. Kathy Sullivan, Acting Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, called on NOAA to focus on the following areas:

1. **Climate:** Through collaborative strategies, continue to advance the observations, modeling, and research necessary to understand climate change and its impacts; and transition mature climate science into regular, reliable, and relevant information services.
2. **Weather:** NOAA will build a “weather-ready” nation by preserving and improving its ability to provide timely and accurate forecasts and warnings for the protection of life and property through science, technology, infrastructure improvements and collaborative efforts with partners.
3. **Oceans:** NOAA will advance our efforts to ensure the long-term sustainability of marine fisheries and recovery of protected species and their habitats.
4. **Coasts:** NOAA will deliver integrated data, information, products, and services needed to support resilient coastal communities and economies.
5. **Science and Technology:** NOAA will focus on developing systems-level understanding of ecosystems and phenomena—across missions and disciplines—with the goal of increasing the resilience of ecosystems, economies, and communities.
6. **Engagement:** NOAA will expand efforts to listen and respond to our customers’ and stakeholders’ concerns and better relate NOAA mission responsibilities and activities to those concerns.
7. **Organization and Administration:** NOAA will further capitalize on recent initiatives to cut costs and improve effectiveness.

As one of five line offices in NOAA, the Fisheries mission is most closely tied to the objectives for the third focus area, the Healthy Oceans goal:

Healthy Oceans: Marine fisheries, habitats, and biodiversity sustained within healthy and productive ecosystems.

Healthy Ocean's goal is to ensure that ocean, estuarine and related ecosystems, and the NOAA trust resources that inhabit them, are resilient and sustainable in the face of increasing threats and changing conditions. A sound understanding of these ecosystems, communication of this knowledge to decision makers and stakeholders, and the capacity and resources to support key NOAA programs are critical to fulfilling this goal (Draft Goal Implementation Plan, 2012).

The Strategic objectives of this Goal are:

- Improved understanding of ecosystems to inform resource management decisions
- Recovered and healthy marine and coastal species
- Healthy habitats that sustain resilient and thriving marine resources and communities
- Sustainable fisheries and safe seafood for healthy populations and vibrant communities

Annual Guidance Memorandum (AGM)

The purpose of the AGM is to focus the agency's corporate attention on near-term execution challenges and a balanced implementation of NOAA's strategy across mission areas, given our mandates, stakeholder priorities, and the fiscal outlook. As the AGM is released on an annual basis, this portion of Appendix A will be updated annually to reflect the most current guidance.

From the FY 2016 AGM Priorities:

NOAA Priority: Provide information and services to make communities more resilient.

- Implement Next Gen stock assessments for species within NOAA's jurisdiction through advancements in monitoring and data collection.
- Make measurable progress on recovery of protected species.
- Increase operational services that promote coastal resiliency.

NOAA Priority: Achieve organizational excellence.

- Under the direction of the Chief Scientist, strengthen alignment of research and development activities to effectively and efficiently support NOAA's operational missions, including accelerating research advances to application.

NOAA Fisheries Priorities and Annual Guidance for 2016

NOAA Fisheries' AGM provides guidance to all NOAA Fisheries employees in executing our mission responsibilities by establishing a framework for development of annual priority milestones. These priorities consider the core mission functions in context of current fiscal conditions.

For fiscal year 2016, NOAA Fisheries will focus on the following core priorities:

- Ensure the productivity and sustainability of fisheries and fishing communities through science-based decision-making and compliance with regulations.
- Recover and conserve protected resources through the use of sound natural and social sciences.
- Improve organizational excellence.

All other NOAA Fisheries programs, projects, and investments should be designed and conducted in a manner that supports these two core mission functions. NOAA Fisheries' approach to these priorities and supporting functions will be guided by the following overarching principles:

- **Advance innovative solutions to emerging challenges (science and stewardship):** NOAA Fisheries will lead innovation and serve as a catalyst to spur innovation.
- **Cultivate our partnerships:** NOAA Fisheries will engage the expertise and capabilities of our partners from the international, federal, tribal and state communities, academia, and nongovernmental.
- **Improve internal and external communications and raise awareness of the NOAA Fisheries mission:** We will strive toward a “no surprises” approach to communicating with our stakeholders and, where practicable, build consensus on expectations and the identification of critical factors to measure success.
- **Improve our decisions and knowledge by transforming data capabilities and access in order to support our mission:** NOAA Fisheries will provide robust data and science utilizing the best available infrastructure and by anticipating customer's needs.

Appendix B: Office of Protected Resources Responsibilities

Permits and Conservation Division

Responsible for issuance of permits and authorizations under the MMPA and ESA, including:

- Issuing scientific research and enhancement permits for marine mammals and non-salmonid, ESA-listed species
- Issuing Letters of Confirmation under the General Authorization and MMPA photography permits for activities involving only Level B harassment of non-listed marine mammals
- Administering the national program for public display of captive whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals, fur seals, and sea lions
- Authorizing import and export of pre-Act MMPA and ESA species parts
- Issuing MMPA incidental take authorizations
- Providing national leadership regarding methods and standards of analysis, mitigation, monitoring, and reporting of acoustic impacts on marine mammals

Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Conservation Division

Responsible for the recovery and conservation of marine mammals and marine turtles under the MMPA and ESA, including:

- Coordinating marine mammal stock assessment reports
- Administering the three MMPA Scientific Review groups
- Coordinating the annual List of Fisheries and the take reduction planning process under the MMPA
- Approving negligible impact determinations for threatened and endangered marine mammals interacting with commercial fisheries
- Providing national guidance and policies related to interpretation of the MMPA and ESA, including those about safe deterrence of marine mammals interacting with human activities, a process for designating marine mammals stocks, guidance for approaching marine mammals in the wild, key MMPA conservation objectives, and improved methods of estimating the impacts of fisheries on sea turtles
- Coordinating and providing national guidance on oil spill and other emergency response activities for marine mammals and sea turtles
- Coordinating ESA implementation of incidental take statements and the Annual Determination for sea turtles
- Coordinating international sea turtle conservation and recovery activities
- Coordinating the national sea turtle recovery program and large whale recovery program

- Developing policies and national guidance to reduce human effects on marine mammals and sea turtles, such as entanglements in fishing gear, man-made sound, and collisions with ships
- Managing the national marine mammal health and stranding response program; including the Unusual Mortality Event Fund, the marine mammal stranding and entanglement response networks, the National Marine Mammal Tissue Bank, and the Prescott Assistance Grant Program

Endangered Species Conservation Division

Responsible for implementing section 4, section 6, section 8, section 9, section 10(a)(1)(B), section 10(a)(1)(A), section 10(j), and overall implementation of the ESA (in coordination with NOAA Fisheries Regional Offices).

Responsibilities include:

- Completing listing decisions, including developing initial findings on petitions and developing status reviews for international and many cross-regional species
- Designating and revising critical habitat for listed species
- Developing and implementing recovery plans
- Promulgating protective regulations under section 4(d) of the ESA
- Conducting five-year status reviews
- Cooperating with the states pursuant to section 6 of the ESA and administering the associated Species Recovery Grants program
- Developing Incidental take permits under Section 10(a)(1)(B)/Habitat Conservation Plans for listed species other than sea turtles
- Designation of experimental populations
- Conservation Banking, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements
- Convention on the International Trade in Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)
- Providing national guidance, policies, and training related to interpretation of the ESA

Planning and Program Coordination Division

Responsible for providing management, guidance and support for budget execution, administrative operations, and information technology including:

- Developing, executing and monitoring the annual budget
- Developing Standard Operating Procedures for administrative process
- Providing information management and technology support
- Providing guidance and management for website content and development
- Providing FOIA guidance and response coordination and support
- Processing grants, contract acquisitions, and inter-agency agreements in coordination with the Office of Acquisitions and Grants
- Coordinating space planning, office re-designs, repairs, and cube assignment
- Providing records management guidance, coordination, and disposition support
- Managing the acquisition, distribution, and disposition of office equipment and supplies

Endangered Species Act Interagency Cooperation Division

Responsible for consulting on any Federal actions that may affect a listed species to minimize the effects of the action, including:

- Consultations associated with actions taken by a national program office, consultations that cover more than two Regional offices, and controversial consultations from individual Regional offices
- Consultations on Incidental Harassment Authorizations
- Consultations on scientific research on ESA-listed species
- Providing national guidance and policies related to interpretation of Section 7 of the ESA
- Developing national section 7 consultation guidance and training

Protected Resources Office Directorate

Responsible for managing and supporting the overall objectives and mission of the NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources, including:

- Defining, setting, and monitoring the implementation of Office of Protected Resources vision and priorities
- Inspiring and leading collaborations between regulatory responsibilities associated with the conservation and recovery of protected species and science capacity for NOAA Fisheries
- Representing NOAA Fisheries on protected resources issues with partners and the public
- Leading the improvement of office operations and workplace environment in coordination with the office management team
- Overseeing the recruitment and retention of a high quality workforce to carry out the Office's priorities
- Providing leadership and inspiring action to create a diverse and inclusive workplace
- Overseeing office products and services for quality and timeliness
- Managing strategic planning, budget development and evaluation, and performance management oversight for the protected resources program
- Coordinating roll-out plan development and execution
- Communicating key messages and engaging with external and internal constituents in partnerships and information sharing
- Ensuring compliance and serving as an expert regarding NOAA Fisheries administrative policies and procedures
- Developing and maintaining office staffing plan and identifying staffing needs for the short and long-term
- Developing, maintaining, and implementing a plan for office-wide training, and coordinating division specific training plans
- Overseeing the development of Standard Operating Procedures associated with operational, administrative, and personnel processes
- Tracking protected resources regulatory actions developed by the Office of Protected Resources or NOAA Fisheries Regions
- Providing advice to NOAA Fisheries leadership regarding Protected Resources priority activities and agency support for those activities

Appendix C: Partners and Stakeholders

Non-NOAA Federal and State Partners

- Bonneville Power Administration
- Coastal state natural resource management agencies
- City and county governments
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
- Federal Highway Administration
- Federally Recognized Indian Tribes and Alaska Native Corporations
- Marine Mammal Commission
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- National Science Foundation
- Regional Fishery Management Councils
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- U.S. Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management
- U.S. Coast Guard
- U.S. Department of Defense
- U.S. Department of Transportation
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- U.S. Forest Service
- U.S. Geological Survey
- U.S. National Park Service
- U.S. Navy

Public and Private Organizations

- Academic institutions
- Agricultural and municipal water users
- Aquaculture industry
- Aquariums, zoos, and museums
- Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
- Commercial fishing industry
- Commercial forest landowners
- Commercial whale watch industry
- General public: school kids, teachers, concerned citizens
- Governmental associations
- International non-governmental groups
- Media
- Public utilities
- Scientific organizations
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- Non-governmental organizations
- Oil and gas industry
- Port authorities
- Private power producers
- Recreational fishing constituents and other recreation and tourism groups
- Shipping industry





U.S. Secretary of Commerce
Penny Pritzker

Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere
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For further information or to download a PDF file of this plan:
www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pr/stratplan.html