

Dear Members of Congress,

The National Marine Sanctuary System is our essential network of underwater parks encompassing over 629,000 square miles of marine and Great Lakes waters. Most are accessible to nearly 10 million coastal citizens living in adjacent counties. National marine sanctuaries are economic anchors in coastal communities, conserve wildlife and preserve America's cultural and maritime history, and promote access to world-class outdoor recreation. By balancing conserving natural and cultural treasures with public access and economic development, sanctuaries underpin thriving tourism industries while also benefiting community well-being by maintaining healthy marine ecosystems.

National marine sanctuaries connect people and communities through recreation, education, U.S. history, science, and stewardship and inspire community-based solutions that help people understand and conserve the spectacular underwater wildlife, archaeological resources, and cultural seascapes of the United States. Providing increased and robust funding to the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS) is an investment in America's national treasures and the communities, local economies, and public-private partnerships that rely on them.

For Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 we strongly urge Congress to support the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries at no less than \$115 million. We respectfully request that you:

- Provide at least \$106.5 million for Sanctuaries and Marine Protected Areas, within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Operations, Research, and Facilities (ORF) account; and,
- Provide at least \$8.5 million for Marine Sanctuaries Construction, within NOAA's Procurement, Acquisition, and Construction (PAC) account.
- Cap NOAA and the National Ocean Service corporate fees to no more than 5 percent of the annual appropriations.
- Direct NOAA to prioritize conservation, education, mapping, and research efforts across the agency in the National Marine Sanctuary System.

Marine sanctuaries anchor marine and coastal economies, jobs, and advance American prosperity and community health. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the marine economy accounted for \$432 bn of US GDP in 2021, with a 7.4% growth over 2020 that outpaced the national economy. National marine sanctuaries drive economic growth by promoting visitation and bolstering tourism and outdoor recreational industries. Their national recognition elevates coastal communities as destinations, fostering investment in attractions, hospitality, and local businesses. Marine sanctuaries generate billions annually in local economies and support numerous jobs and businesses in the fishing, tourism, recreation, and scientific research sectors. Sanctuary visitor centers, vessels, and facilities are key assets for communities; stimulate public-private partnerships on emerging technologies, cutting edge science, and hands-on education and workforce development, and attract millions of visitors each year¹.

Marine sanctuaries create world renown tourism destinations and economic gateways for communities. These centers educate visitors, showcase local heritage, and drive economic growth. Alpena, Michigan, home to Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, exemplifies this impact—with a population of just over 10,000, its Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center attracts over 100,000 visitors annually. Funding such community centers is essential for sustaining productive coastal economies.

The conservation and sustainable use of marine ecosystems are vital to maintaining world-class fishing grounds in the ocean and Great Lakes, underpinning productive coastal economies. National marine

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<https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/education/reach/#:~:text=Over%2044%20Million%20%2D%20Visitors%20to,exhibits%20about%20national%20marine%20sanctuaries.>

sanctuaries partner with commercial and recreational fishermen, businesses, charters, and education partners to connect families and youth to our ocean and Great Lakes through activities such as recreational saltwater fishing, fostering a sense of stewardship and responsibility for America's great outdoors. Marine sanctuaries support world-class fishing by preserving marine ecosystems and enhancing fish stocks. These areas help wildlife thrive, rebuild fisheries, and strengthen ecosystem health. The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary remains one of the top five global recreational fishing destinations, supporting jobs and local coastal economies. Visitor spending, related to ocean recreation in the Florida Keys, contributes approximately \$4.4 billion to Florida's economy each year². Sanctuary management also mitigates invasive species and strengthens coastal resilience to protect habitats, public safety, and economic stability.

Marine sanctuaries honor America's military history and maritime heritage. As the U.S. approaches its 250th anniversary, the National Marine Sanctuary System offers a unique opportunity to celebrate history and heroes while protecting underwater treasures. Many of the greatest relics representing America's past as a seafaring nation lie at the bottom of the sea and lakes in our national marine sanctuaries. Marine sanctuaries preserve America's maritime heritage, safeguarding shipwrecks, naval battlefields, and sacred cultural sites that tell our nation's rich history. They honor the past, from Revolutionary War shipwrecks to the USS Monitor, showcasing American innovation.

Sanctuaries serve as innovation hubs for new ventures and technology applications. ONMS has a prestigious history of science and research expeditions, including a half-century of new discoveries that inspire, educate, and awe. Marine sanctuaries foster exploration and discovery through partnerships with researchers and adventurers, uncovering new artifacts, wildlife, and stories. Leading universities and research centers conduct aquaculture studies and test innovative technologies that advance sustainable ocean enterprise solutions. Private-public collaboration among investors, businesses, and research institutions develop solutions such as new fishing gear that balances conservation and industry needs. These initiatives help to restore critical habitats, produce jobs, and enhance community well-being.

ONMS operates a fleet of ships equipped for mapping, monitoring, buoy maintenance, and rapid emergency response, enhancing public safety and resource protection. Maintaining investment in recapitalizing aging vessels in addition to upgrades, retrofits, and life-cycle extensions is mission critical. Increasing demands on an aging fleet lead to higher operating costs and challenges to maintaining safe, efficient, and effective operations. Increased PAC funding would support the replacement or repair of vessels, drive shipbuilding construction, and allow for better monitoring, research, emergency response, and enforcement efforts.

National marine sanctuaries are of the People, by the People, and for the People. Public service and participation are hallmarks of marine sanctuaries; from nomination to day-to-day operations, communities are at the core of sanctuaries. Decisions about how to best manage each of these nationally significant places continuously utilize the best available scientific data, as well as extensive public input, including community-based advisory groups that advise on the unique resources and needs of each sanctuary's respective community. Robust funding will ensure sound, community-centered management of these treasured waters and allow ONMS to strengthen its research, monitoring, restoration, community engagement, and interagency partnerships, to better inform locally driven management decisions. This is an opportunity to invest in America's waters and the communities and businesses that depend upon them.

We must all be stewards of our ocean and Great Lakes—for the communities that rely on them, wildlife that depend on them, and for future generations. We strongly encourage you to invest in America's community-centered national marine sanctuaries by supporting the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries at no less than \$115 million in Fiscal Year 2026. Your support will send a powerful message about the benefits of a healthy ocean and Great Lakes and underscore the continuing ecological, economic,

² <https://marinesanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/FKNMS-Report-Final-072819.pdf>

and historical value of America's underwater national treasures. Through national marine sanctuaries, we can work collectively to conserve these resources for all Americans to enjoy. We thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,