NOAA HABITAT BLUEPRINT

A framework to improve habitat for fisheries, marine life, and coastal communities

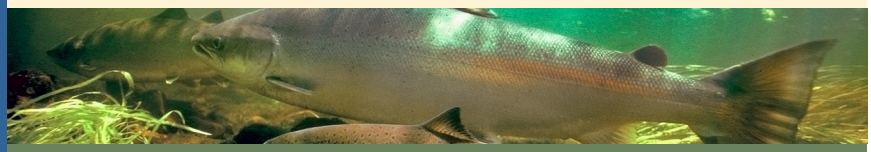
PURPOSE

The Habitat Blueprint provides a forward-looking framework for NOAA to think and act strategically across programs and with partner organizations to address the growing challenge of coastal and marine habitat loss and degradation.

We will increase the effectiveness of our efforts to improve habitat conditions for fisheries, and coastal and marine life, along with other economic, cultural, and environmental benefits our society needs and enjoys.

VISION

Healthy habitats that sustain resilient and thriving marine and coastal resources, communities, and economies.



OUTCOMES

- Sustainable and abundant fish populations
- Recovered threatened and endangered species
- Protected coastal and marine areas and habitats at risk
- Resilient coastal communities
- Increased coastal/marine tourism, access, and recreation

Why do we need the Habitat Blueprint now?

Protecting our natural infrastructure—our global life support systems—is vital to protecting our communities and their economies as well as fisheries and recreational opportunities along our coasts. With continued widespread loss and deterioration of coastal and marine habitats, we are in danger of losing this infrastructure. Congress has charged the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) with protecting habitat for fish, threatened and endangered species, marine mammals, and other natural resources within the coastal zone.

As NOAA works to ensure healthy oceans for future generations, we need to increase the sustainability and productivity of our fisheries by focusing on the habitat that fish need to spawn and grow, as well as protecting the coastal resources on which our communities depend. Recognizing the need for more concerted efforts to conserve (protect and restore) habitat, we developed the NOAA Habitat Blueprint to build on existing programs, prioritize our activities, and guide our future actions. Simply put—we are improving the way we do business.

Guiding Principles

- Prioritize resources and activities across NOAA to monitor, understand, and improve habitat conditions.
- Implement innovative place-based habitat solutions to address coastal and marine resource challenges.
- Make natural resource management decisions and recommendations in an ecosystem context that considers competing priorities.
- Foster and leverage partnerships.
- Integrate and improve the delivery of habitat science across disciplines to facilitate conservation actions.
- Anticipate and address changes to coastal and ocean habitats due to environmental change; including development, climate, and other pressures.

What is the Habitat Blueprint framework?

NOAA is developing and implementing new habitat-based solutions to support healthy and productive ecosystems. We will expand our partnerships, prioritize our activities, and direct our focus to better understand, protect, and restore habitat for the benefit of our living marine resources and coastal communities.

The Habitat Blueprint has a three-pronged approach:

1. Establish NOAA habitat focus areas for long-term habitat science and conservation.
2. Implement a systematic and strategic approach to habitat science to inform effective decision-making.
3. Strengthen policy and legislation to enhance our ability to achieve meaningful habitat conservation.

To help inform these approaches, NOAA identified and launched regional habitat initiatives highlighted on page 6.

Establish Habitat Focus Areas

Establish NOAA habitat focus areas to prioritize long-term habitat science and conservation efforts. We will direct our expertise, resources for science, and on-the-ground conservation efforts in targeted areas to maximize our investments and the benefits to marine resources and coastal communities.

Key Actions

- Select habitat focus areas in each NOAA region by identifying spatial intersections where collaboration among NOAA management and science programs and external partners will address multiple habitat-dependent objectives. These priorities will leverage additional resources and achieve conservation results with greater efficiency.

We will select habitat focus areas based on:

- Harvested federally managed fish species for which increased habitat abundance and/or improved conditions will increase harvest levels and remove limiting factors for rebuilding stocks.

- Protected species for which increased habitat abundance and/or improved condition is a limiting factor for recovery or is needed to prevent listing of a species.

- Protected coastal and marine areas and at-risk habitats identified for their significant ecological, conservation, recreational, historic, cultural, or aesthetic values. Focused long-term habitat conservation and science will aid in the recovery and/or protection of these critical areas, ensuring sustained ecosystem services and function.

- Resilient coastal communities in which habitat conservation will increase protection of life and property from the impacts of hazards such as storm surge, coastal flooding, and changes in sea level. Habitat conservation in these areas will also reduce land-based sources of pollution to support ecosystem productivity and human health.

- Coastal and ocean tourism, access, and recreation such as recreational fishing, diving, and beach access, which create jobs and strengthen the local economy.

Once NOAA selects focus areas, we will:

- Define measurable targets for habitat conservation in these priority areas, coordinate with ongoing related activities, and implement actions using all available programs, authorities, partnerships, and tools.

- Measure and evaluate progress and share lessons learned across NOAA and with external partners.

Enhance Habitat Science

Implement a systematic and strategic approach to habitat science to inform effective decision-making. We will prioritize our science and use a more integrative approach for planning and conducting quality habitat science.

Key Actions

- Improve delivery of NOAA's habitat science (products and services) to foster better decision-making and encourage complementary conservation actions across federal, state, and local levels.
- Strengthen coordination among existing habitat-related science, modeling, and observation activities within NOAA, leveraging ongoing research efforts focused on NOAA trust resources.
- Assess and map habitats to characterize them within each region, identify and designate essential fish habitat, conserve and manage habitat for priority species, and identify priority areas for conservation.
- Improve harvested and protected species stock assessments and fishery-independent surveys using habitat information to increase precision of biomass estimates.
- Increase the habitat component in tools such as Integrated Ecosystem Assessments (IEAs) and regional marine planning to foster better decision-making for coastal and marine human activities and natural resources.
- Examine science funding streams for opportunities to address NOAA's habitat science needs. These needs include conducting studies to better understand habitat use by stocks, habitat-related productivity, and habitat dependency of harvested and protected species.
- Explore approaches for incorporating socio-cultural and economic sciences into habitat assessments.

Strengthen Policy and Legislation

Strengthen policy and legislation at the national level to enhance our ability to achieve meaningful habitat conservation. We will strive to remove barriers and seize opportunities to improve our policies, regulations, and legal authorities. This will ensure that habitat considerations are an integral part of marine and coastal resource management and will strengthen NOAA's habitat conservation focus overall.

Key Actions

- Consider opportunities for regulatory reform such as revising or making better use of existing Magnuson-Stevens Act and Endangered Species Act authorities. Begin with a strategic evaluation of the essential fish habitat program and the Endangered Species Act program to improve effectiveness in delivering targeted habitat protection results.
- Explore innovative habitat policies within NOAA and with other agencies, such as incorporating ecosystem services and/or promoting carbon credits in policies and practices. We will also explore opportunities to leverage programs such as USDA conservation programs and EPA Clean Water Act authorities.
- Support reauthorization of NOAA's existing authorities for managing coastal and ocean ecosystems and their habitats, such as the Coastal Zone Management Act, National Marine Sanctuaries Act, Coral Reef Conservation Act, and Magnuson-Stevens Act.
- Investigate developing new NOAA habitat policies and/or legislation to elevate the agency's focus on and provide a strong mandate for habitat conservation to achieve NOAA's habitat-related outcomes.
- Revise the NOAA Fisheries Habitat Policy to formalize the Habitat Blueprint.

Getting Started—Regional Habitat Initiatives

As a first step in implementing the Habitat Blueprint and to build internal momentum, NOAA launched regional initiatives to explore new collaborative approaches for habitat science and conservation. Separate from the habitat focus areas, these efforts are helping us test aspects of each of the three Habitat Blueprint approaches: focusing efforts in discrete places, linking science to management, and seeking policy efficiencies to inform future actions within the Habitat Blueprint.

The initiatives below are implementing habitat-based solutions to increase the long-term productivity of living marine resources and addressing climate change in coastal communities. We selected these as immediate opportunities to strengthen our place-based activities through the NOAA Sentinel Site Cooperatives and increase collaborative efforts between NOAA Fisheries regions and science centers.

Northeast
—Deep-Sea Coral Conservation

Chesapeake Bay
—Chesapeake Bay Sentinel Site Cooperative
—Tributary-based Oyster Restoration

Great Lakes
—Manistique River Restoration

Southeast
—Charleston Harbor Watershed Habitat Conservation and Restoration
—North Carolina Sentinel Site Cooperative
—Northern Gulf of Mexico Sentinel Site Cooperative

Southwest
—Southern California Bight Habitat Assessment
—San Francisco Bay Area Sentinel Site Cooperative

Northwest
—Puget Sound Habitat Initiative

Pacific Islands
—Conservation Strategies for Guam Development
—Hawaii Sentinel Site Cooperative