A Call to Action from the
Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee and the
National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Councils

Destination Marine Protected Areas: Sustaining America's Most Treasured Ocean Places for Recreation and Stewardship
June 2014

This is a call to action from the nation's leading advisory bodies on marine protected areas. It reflects our collective commitment to ensure proactive management of growing ocean recreation in these special places in order to sustain the natural and cultural assets that we treasure.

Recreation is growing rapidly throughout the US, and recreation along our coasts and in our ocean is no exception. From sport fishing, to bird and whale watching, to stand-up paddling, Americans are playing in our oceans, Great Lakes and along our coasts in numbers and ways not anticipated just a few years ago. We believe strongly that healthy, viable marine ecosystems are fundamental to successful ocean recreation and tourism. People are drawn to clean waters, healthy habitats, diverse biological communities and intact cultural resources. Consequently, maintaining these qualities within marine protected areas through management of recreational uses will, in turn, ensure continued visitation and use along with the attendant benefits they generate to coastal communities. Most importantly, visitation to these places may help reshape how we, as a people, relate to our oceans.

A new Executive Order (#13597) calls for the significant expansion of travel and tourism in the US, particularly among federal lands and waters. As members of the Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee and the National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Councils, we call upon federal ocean agencies, working with state, local, territorial and tribal governments, and indigenous groups and communities, to chart a new course for America's MPAs. That course must embrace recreational uses where appropriate, and manage them to ensure these places have a lasting role in America's future.

When planned and managed sustainably, recreational activities in MPAs can yield health, education and economic benefits to users and coastal communities. However, if recreational uses are allowed to expand haphazardly, they have the potential to inadvertently undermine the very qualities that draw people to these special ocean and coastal places everywhere in America today. The following federal actions in four related areas will, in our view, greatly enhance the ability of all MPAs to meet both the challenges and the opportunities posed by America's renewed attention to the sea, especially in a time of change.

1. Invite People to Play (Responsibly) in MPAs

Ocean agencies, working with local communities, should actively shape how and where ocean recreation occurs in MPAs and along our coasts. Powerful actions with lasting benefits for protected ecosystems, cultural resources and coastal communities, include: (i) highlighting MPAs as destinations for sustainable recreation through travel, tourism and outdoor equipment industries; guides and charters; educational programs; hospitality industry; general media; and visitor centers; (ii) using a consistent set of messages to inform visitors about compatible uses in MPAs and along our coasts; and, (iii) ensuring that ongoing national recreation, travel and tourism initiatives sustains the natural and cultural assets that make these places special.

2. Embrace the Human Dimension of Ocean Places

Ensuring that recreational uses are sustainable in MPAs and along our coasts requires more than just a welcome sign. To effectively manage growing recreational uses and to realize their largely untapped potential for building lasting constituencies, MPA agencies must also better understand how, where and why people connect to these special places, and how their recreational activities reflect and shape local communities, cultures and economies. To this end, federal programs should collaborate and invest now in understanding: (i) the origins, drivers, status and emerging trends in recreational uses of MPAs; (ii) the social, cultural and economic benefits and possible detriments of those uses to coastal communities; (iii) how recreational uses fit into the broader and evolving picture of other commercial, military, scientific and tribal and indigenous uses in these areas and along our coast.

> Marine protected areas (MPAs) are defined as "Any area of the marine environment that has been reserved by federal, state, territorial, tribal or local laws or regulations to provide lasting protection for part or all of the natural and cultural resources therein." MPAs vary widely in their purposes and level of protection. Familiar examples include National Marine Sanctuaries, National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges and the state counterparts to these programs.

3. Sustain MPA Ecosystems and Values

Expanding ocean recreation poses new challenges to MPA managers who may lack sufficient information, tools or authorities to sustainably manage them. MPA agencies should invest in filling that gap where it exists, for example by: (i) improving understanding of carrying capacities for common recreational uses (i.e. how much is too much?); (ii) implementing new and proactive management approaches to ensure sustainability, including special use areas to allocate specific activities to appropriate areas within the MPA; (iii) evaluating the adequacy of, and if necessary, adjusting existing management authorities to meet anticipated needs for ecologically sustainable recreation and thereby informing all communities along our coast.

4. Engage Recreational Users as Ocean Stewards

Many recreational users share strong conservation values and understand the importance of sustaining the ecosystems and cultural sites they choose to visit. MPA sites can do much to encourage sustainable recreation by, for example: (i) engaging key user groups in adopting best practices that ensure the long-term viability of the ecosystems they value; (ii) forging innovative public-private partnerships with recreational industries and associations with the ability to influence key user groups; (iii) fostering citizen science to engage visitors in data collection for management; (iv) promoting visitor centers to connect inaccessible sites to the broader public; and, (v) developing cadres of ocean stewards (e.g. on the water docents) including youth and underserved communities, linked by common experiences of recreating in MPAs and carrying those conservation messages to other ocean areas wherever they travel.

Making It Happen

We are acutely aware of the fiscal challenges facing all coastal and ocean agencies. Many of the actions recommended above involve collaborating and sharing resources and capabilities across agencies. Others require additional funding and can build capacity among our partners. It is in the national interest, and critical at this time, for you to consider these ideas and commit the necessary resources, guidance and programming to ensure that our nation's special ocean places can realize their vast potential to serve America and its future.

This statement was developed based on joint sessions of the Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee and the Chairs of the National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Councils in December 2012 and June 2014. It was formally adopted by the Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee on June 4, 2014, and will be presented to each of the 13 National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Councils and the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve Advisory Council for formal approval during Summer 2014.

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