

Protecting Species and Places: A Partnership for Place and Species-Based Conservation

Protegiendo Especies y Lugares: Una Colaboración para Conservar Lugares y Especies

Protéger les Espèces et les Lieux: Un Partenariat pour la Conservation des Lieux et des

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Programs to protect threatened and endangered species and conserve important areas have overlapping conservation goals and can benefit from close collaboration. Here we provide an overview of this type of collaboration focusing on the Gulf and Caribbean. The Protecting Species and Places (PSP) conservation program was created by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Office of Protected Resources and Office of National Marine Sanctuaries to build partnerships to link and align place-based and species-based conservation efforts in U.S. waters and beyond.

The Office of Protected Resources (OPR) recovers and conserves protected resources by working to reduce threats to species and enhance species' health based on science-based policy and management. The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries maintains a sanctuary system to protect underwater treasures in U.S. waters in the oceans and Great Lakes and partners with other marine protected areas, including internationally. NOAA's domestic statutes, like the Endangered Species Act and National Marine Sanctuaries Act, limit agency authority for protection of marine resources largely to U.S. waters. Because many protected species use waters and important habitats, some of which may be existing or potential marine protected areas (MPAs) of other countries, OPR needs help in protecting these shared rare species and special places. The PSP Program is a vehicle to establish and strengthen connectivity among scientists, managers, conservationists, and others who aim to protect biological and ecological connectivity of marine species.

Species cross geographic and political boundaries as do their habitats. With this in mind, PSP was developed with three main goals. The first is to improve coordination between marine protected area (MPA) management plans and species recovery plans to increase protection of species under multiple jurisdictions. This refers to the possibility for internal alignment through incorporation of species recovery goals and specific protections for critical habitat and essential fish habitat (with our NOAA Habitat Conservation partners), as examples, in sanctuary management plans. The second is to identify conservation strategies and mechanisms to conserve species and places that fall outside MPA management and recovery plans. This refers to the possibility for incorporating protections for species and their habitats in management plans for MPAs outside U.S. waters, such as through expanding existing sister sanctuary agreements to include management actions to conserve additional species and habitats (like the humpback whale agreements for some MPAs in the Caribbean). The third is to identify, support, and enhance interagency and international collaboration to conserve marine species and places. This refers to the possibility of aligning with international efforts such as the Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW Protocol) toward the protection of species listed under the protocol. NOAA is involved in key international partnerships such as SPAW in the Wider Caribbean that includes species such as the Nassau grouper listed as endangered under the International Union for Conservation of Nature and threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. By leveraging partnerships using the multiple NOAA offices engaged in the program, PSP promotes the conservation of species such as Nassau grouper and their habitats in support of efforts under SPAW and the Spawning Aggregations Working Group (SAWG) of the Western and Central Atlantic Fishery Commission.

The objectives of SPAW's program focus on protection of both species and areas in the Wider Caribbean. Thirty-two protected areas that are recognized as regionally important are listed under SPAW in nine countries. The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has been engaged in work to better connect the SPAW-listed MPAs into a functional network.

The Western and Central Atlantic Fishery Commission is the regional fisheries body responsible for the effective conservation, management, and development of the living marine resources in the Atlantic waters of the Caribbean. The Commission established the SAWG, which is working to create a fishery management plan for spawning aggregations of Nassau grouper and mutton snapper, along with a communications plan with an outreach component to involve stakeholders.

NOAA is leveraging partnerships under PSP to support efforts under SPAW and the SAWG and explore ways to ensure that the listed MPAs are taking active measures to protect listed species like Nassau grouper, seeking regional collaboration to establish a no fishing period from December to March to protect spawning aggregations, and incorporate

fishers in the development of strategies to stop the removal of spawning adults. NOAA Fisheries is also using the information gained by these collaborations in its work to designate critical habitat in U.S. waters and to plan for recovery of Nassau grouper.

Through strengthened collaboration between the Office of Protected Resources and the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and other NOAA offices and programs under PSP, we are working together to promote the conservation and recovery of listed species such as Nassau grouper, including incorporating priorities for conservation in Sanctuary management plans and in efforts with international partners in the Caribbean.

KEYWORDS: marine protected areas, protected resources, sanctuaries, NOAA, collaboration.