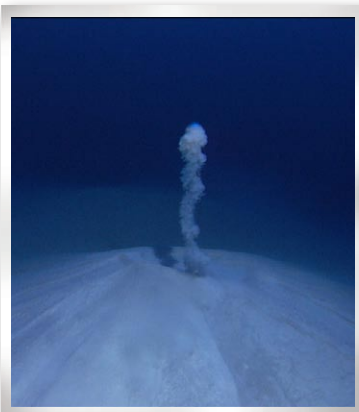


FLOWER GARDEN BANKS

2 0 0 7 A C C O M P L I S H M E N T S



Deep-water mud volcano in the sanctuary filmed during the NR-1 mission. Photo: NOAA



Students visit the NR-1 prior to its launch. Photo: NOAA



The marbled grouper was listed as "near threatened" based on data collected by NOAA. Photo: NOAA

Secrets of the Gulf: Exploring Underwater Connections

The northwestern Gulf of Mexico is home to many geologic formations that boast a wealth of fascinating shallow- and deep-water systems, including coral reefs, brine seeps and mud volcanoes like the ones found in Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. How these systems are connected to one another and fit into a broader environmental picture was the focus of the "Secrets of the Gulf" expedition to the sanctuary in March 2007. Scientists aboard the U.S. Navy's NR-1 submarine and two other ships sought to gain a better understanding of the sanctuary's benthic communities and looked for evidence that certain areas in the region provide protective cover for animals traveling between distinct geologic features. They also searched for signs of ancient human habitation in an area of the Gulf believed to have once been above water. From this mission, and others like it, scientists hope to gather information that is crucial to the protection of the sanctuary.

Secrets of the Gulf: Connecting People with Oceans and Science

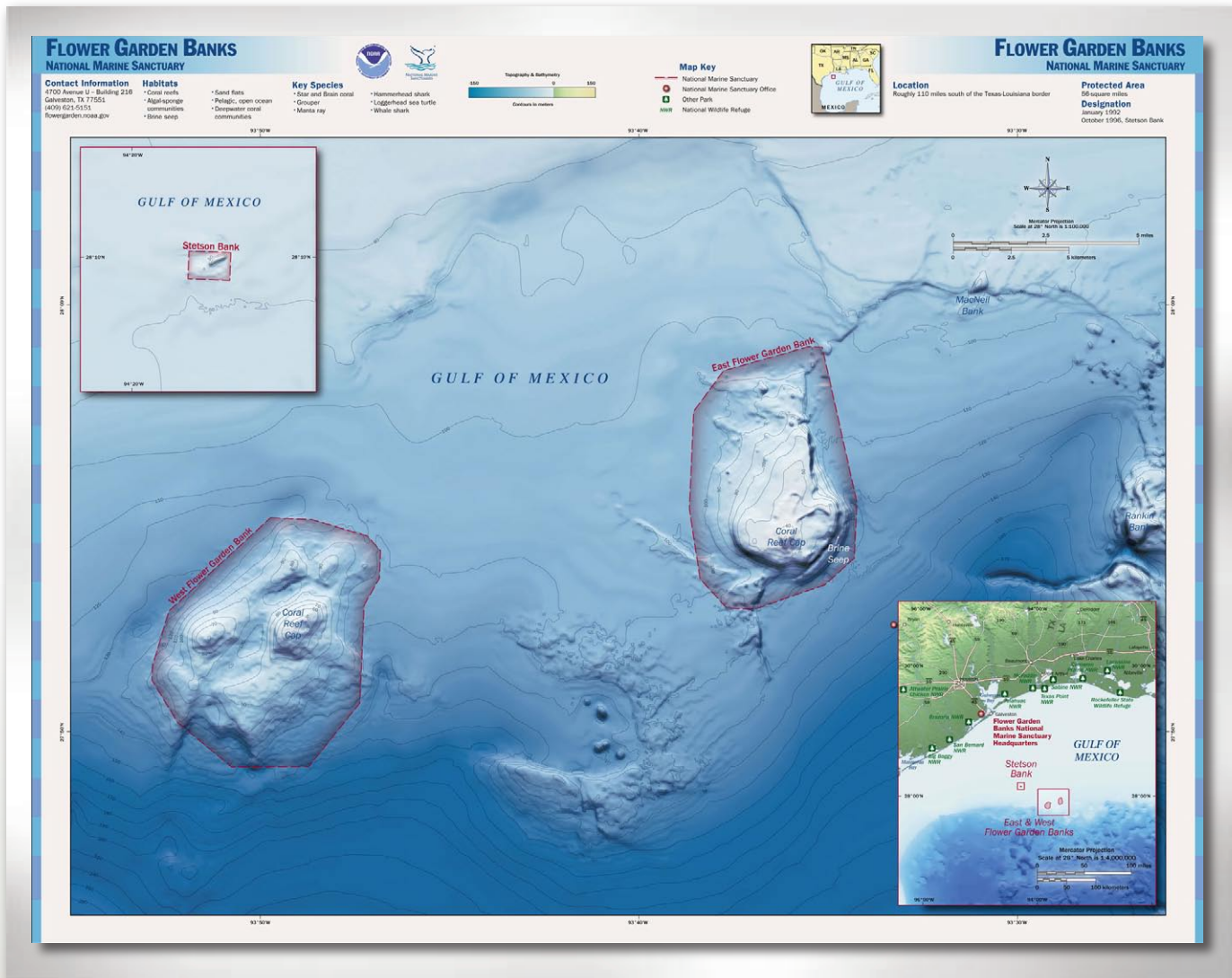
Scientists were not the only ones exploring connections during the NR-1 expedition. The project was an excellent example of connecting education and outreach directly to scientific research. Anyone with high-speed internet access could tune in at any time and experience science in action through live video feeds of natural wonders like underwater mud volcanoes and "lakes" of high-density salt water from brine seeps. Immersion Presents, a NOAA partner, conducted five broadcasts a day, featuring interviews with members of the expedition team and the most recent updates on the explorations. During the mission, students from 45 Boys & Girls Clubs around the nation participated in the live broadcasts, interacting with explorer Robert Ballard and other team members. Principal partners for the expedition were the National Marine Sanctuary Program, Immersion Presents, Mystic Aquarium's Institute for Exploration, Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, the U.S. Navy and the University of Rhode Island.

Marbled Grouper Status Changed

For a time, the marbled grouper was listed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) as a species of "least concern," primarily due to lack of information. That is, until sanctuary staff provided information to the organization for re-evaluation of the species, leading the IUCN to change the status of marbled grouper from least concern to "near threatened." Using information collected over several years by sanctuary-sponsored expeditions, combined with data obtained from NOAA Fisheries surveys, researchers were able to demonstrate that marbled grouper populations are likely declining. The IUCN also agreed to evaluate the designation sooner than the usual 10 years. Sanctuary staff will continue to collect information on marbled grouper and other species to insure that the IUCN has adequate information upon which to base future assessments and recommended actions.

<http://flowergarden.noaa.gov>





Sanctuary maps available at sanctuaries.noaa.gov

Sanctuary Celebrates 15 Years of Stewardship

In January 2007, Flower Garden Banks sanctuary staff celebrated 15 years of conservation and protection by joining forces with NOAA Fisheries to host NOAA Ocean Discovery Day. Three hundred area residents turned out to learn about NOAA's ocean conservation activities in the sanctuary. Visitors saw how sanctuaries use geographic information systems to characterize habitats and learned why wetlands are important to ecosystems and how NOAA Fisheries protects them. NOAA Enforcement was on hand to explain its role in protecting ocean treasures, and representatives from Texas A&M University provided information about education opportunities to young people aspiring to ocean careers. Visitors were also treated to performances by Lucas Miller, the singing zoologist, who related wildlife science concepts through songs and stories.

To learn more about these and other accomplishments, visit sanctuaries.noaa.gov

