

Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council Meeting

June 20, 2007

Sapelo Saltwater Fishing Club
Shellman Bluff, Townsend, Georgia

Meeting Summary

Highlights

- ➔ Next meeting week of September 24th
- ➔ Condition Report to be reassessed; update in September (p. 2)
- ➔ Marine debris and new regulations outreach ongoing (p. 4)
- ➔ Law enforcement reporting quarterly (p. 4)
- ➔ Research Area Process beginning; focus at September meeting (p. 5)

Distributed Materials

- Meeting Agenda
- Advisory Council Meeting Summary January 2007 (email)
- GRNMS Program Report (email)
- Draft Research Area Process Summary

Advisory Council Members Present

Joe Kimmel, Chair, NOAA Fisheries SERO
Clark Alexander, Non-living Resources Research
Spud Woodward, GA DNR Coastal Resources Division
Aimee Gaddis, Sapelo Island NEER
Doug Lewis, GA DNR Law Enforcement
Venetia Butler, K-12 Education
Christi Lambert, Regional Conservation
Will Berson, Georgia Conservation
Leslie Sautter, University Education
Tim Tarver, Sport Fishing
LT Charlie Gris, U.S. Coast Guard

Advisory Council Members Absent

Danny Gleason, Living Resources Research
Ralph Neely, Sport Diving
Judy Helmey, Commercial/Charter Fishing

GRNMS and NOAA Staff Present:

George Sedberry, GRNMS Superintendent
Cathy Sakas, GRNMS Education Coordinator
Becky Shortland, GRNMS Stewardship Coordinator
Gail Krueger, GRNMS Outreach Coordinator
Al Samuels, NOAA Office for Law Enforcement

Public Present

LTJG Laura Swift, U.S. Coast Guard

William McNeely, Sapelo Saltwater Fishing Club
John Crosby, Sapelo Saltwater Fishing Club
Jimmy Mason, Sapelo Saltwater Fishing Club
Ed Henderson, Sapelo Saltwater Fishing Club
Brooke Vallaster, Sapelo Island NERR
Jim Stokes, The Georgia Conservancy

Welcome, Introductions, Advisory Council Business

Gray's Reef NMS Advisory Council Chair Dr. Joe Kimmel opened the meeting, welcomed everyone and asked for introductions. LT Michael "Charlie" Gris was welcomed as a new member of GRNMS SAC. LT Gris has replaced LT Eric Johnson as Commanding Officer of the USCG Southeast Regional Fisheries Training Center in Charleston, SC.

Dr. Kimmel quickly reviewed the agenda and asked for approval. All present approved the agenda. He then called for approval of the April 2007 meeting summary that had been distributed electronically. The meeting summary was approved.

Joe Kimmel and Becky Shortland thanked advisory council member Tim Tarver for hosting the meeting at the Sapelo Saltwater Fishing Club.

Becky Shortland suggested that the next meeting be held in September, possibly at GRNMS headquarters in Savannah. She asked that the members consider this when discussing the research area process later in the day.

Sanctuary Program Updates

Members were asked to refer to the program summary that was sent electronically.

Working Group Activities

Research Advisory Panel/Gray's Reef NMS Condition Report

Dr. George Sedberry reviewed the status of sanctuary's draft condition report. He noted that a variety of parameters are examined in the report characterizing the status and trends of water quality, habitat, living marine resources, and maritime archaeological resources. The report is still in progress since it is difficult to simplify a complex task. The report seeks to communicate quickly and simply the information but it is not easy to boil this information down in a succinct way with a color coded table. Becky Shortland noted that the advisory council was given a copy of the draft report at the April meeting. She explained that staff will try to complete the report by the September advisory council meeting.

Dr. Clark Alexander, co-chair (along with Dr. Danny Gleason) of the advisory panel, explained further that all sanctuary condition reports need to be consistent across the National Marine Sanctuary Program, although sites are on different

schedules for completing work. There has been a great deal of discussion and concern regarding the color coding of the conditions in the report, which led to a recent conference call and agreement to revisit the coding. Clark Alexander, Danny Gleason and Greg McFall are to lead this effort.

Stellwagen Bank NMS' Condition Report was the first to be published and met with a good deal of media attention, some negative, regarding the sanctuary's ability to protect resources and conflict between NOAA Fisheries and the NMSP. The public perception is that a sanctuary should be a "sanctuary" and it is apparently not. Others noted that it is good that Stellwagen's report was published first so that Gray's Reef and other sites can learn from their experience.

Questions were then raised by advisory council members about whether the draft Gray's Reef report is an accurate portrayal of the status of the sanctuary. Clark Alexander noted that color coding is a quick way of looking at conditions in a particular site, but that it is misleading. The concerns with color coding is that the public and decision-makers will pick up on the "message" portrayed by the color coding and trends table and not read the text that follows to understand the context and actual condition. The draft condition report was then projected and Becky Shortland pointed out the table and specifics that were being discussed. Clark continued that he believes some "conditions" are not accurately reflected in the color coding, trends, and accompanying standard explanations due to the constraints put upon the Research Advisory Panel in developing the table.

After considerable discussion among members, it was agreed that the status may not need to be reassessed, but the trends do need attention and revision (**See note added page 6 from Danny Gleason.*) Clark Alexander agreed to take the recommendations made during the meeting and go back to the full Research Advisory Panel to reassess the report in terms of trends.

Clark was then asked what the basic conclusions are in the report. He gave a brief overview that the water quality is good, although the biggest unknown is that we don't know what trends are for coastal development that may impact water quality at the reef. He continued that the health of habitat and living resources is generally good, although some fish populations experience a lot of fishing pressure. Marine debris is a problem. The reef's bottom features may contribute to accumulation of trash on top of the heavy fishing pressure over the reef. Some debris is coming from land. Education and outreach programs are attempting to address this issue. But overall the unknowns are what the long term effects will be from increased coastal development with direct and indirect impacts on Gray's Reef.

Dr. Leslie Sautter asked if the condition report mentioned the research area concept. Dr. Alexander answered that there some detail of the concept in the Abstract, Recreational Fishing section and the Condition Summary Table of the report. She expressed concerns that the research area and its purposes be highlighted in the condition report; that the research area is a means to formulate

a plan to address the conditions and trends. She emphasized that this will help the public understand both the condition report and the need for a research area.

Education & Outreach Working Group/Marine Debris Grant Outreach

Venetia Butler, chair of the working group, reported that she met with staff to outline a variety of ideas for outreach opportunities with the grant funding from NOAA. Gail Krueger has developed a PowerPoint presentation that can be presented by anyone and Venetia asked that members consider giving presentations to their constituent groups. No members volunteered.

Messaged items (floatable key chain with plastic card, coosie, rack cards, and bandanas) were passed around to all present. These items are being distributed through fishing tournaments, thanks to volunteer Hal Jenkins and other staff. Not only do these items get the marine debris message across, but they also identify the new regulations and enforcement contact numbers. Gail Krueger also reported that our main cleanup events focus on Oceans Day June 8th. A beach cleanup occurred with partner Clean Coast on Wassaw Island and we are still hoping to arrange a reef cleanup although funding for a charter is not available this year.

Venetia Butler also mentioned that a new opportunity may be developing with partner Thunderbolt Elementary Marine Science Program. Brooke Vallaster also emphasized that Sapelo Island NERR has data on beach cleanups as does The Ocean Conservancy in vast quantities.

Once again, Will Berson kindly reminded staff that an opportunity exists to distribute our materials and messages through community dock/boater awareness programs at Georgia DNR.

As a side note, Leslie Sautter reminded members that Oceania has some wonderful video at:
(<http://oceanica.cofc.edu/GraysReef2006/VideoGallery/default.htm>)

Law Enforcement Working Group

GA DNR's Doug Lewis reported that over the last 10 months, 10 trips were made by law enforcement personnel to Gray's Reef, totaling 487 man hours. Fourteen boats were checked and three warnings for anchoring violations are being issued. He also reported that the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) conducted an evaluation of performance through the Joint Enforcement Agreement with GADNR. The audit went very well and they received a good report. In fact, NOAA OLE is providing more funding and GADNR has ordered a new vessel. Sergeant Lewis also reported that ten officers have now been trained at the U.S. Coast Guard's Southeast Regional Fisheries Training Center (SERFTC) and that more training is planned with SERFTC sending trainers to GADNR. He also reported that the new JEA had been signed along with the Gray's Reef amendment.

On the downside, Doug Lewis reported that no identification has been forthcoming from NOAA OLE as requested by GADNR officers. NOAA OLE's Al Samuels added that federal identification for state officers has now become a national issue and will take more time to resolve. On the upside, Special Agent Samuels has produced a "cheat sheet" on sanctuary regulations and distributed those to GADNR officers.

On behalf of the U.S. Coast Guard, LT Gris and LTJG Swift reported that of their four assets (cutters and air assets), Station Brunswick had not traveled to Gray's Reef, but that they are now working with GADNR. CG Cutter Yellowfin and Air Station Savannah performed a joint effort May 2-3, which included coverage of Gray's Reef. CG Cutter Tarpon made three transits of the sanctuary with no observations.

Clark Alexander asked whether the remote sensing system planned for Gray's Reef was functional. The answer was unclear, but Becky Shortland promised to report at the next meeting. Spud Woodward reminded everyone that the Navy will be decommissioning their offshore towers in the near future.

Becky Shortland reported that after the April meeting and discussion of boating safety enforcement gaps in the sanctuary, she requested some response from General Counsel Ocean Service. Al Samuels noted that he also requested information concerning the issue and any applicability of the existing Gray's Reef prohibition "*Operating a watercraft other than in accordance with the Federal rules and regulations that would apply if there were no Sanctuary.*"

Research Area Working Group

Becky Shortland asked members to review the draft research area process summary that was handed out. She noted that this will be edited into a simpler outreach piece for public distribution over the summer. Becky also outlined the proposed timeline for the public process beginning with the next advisory council meeting in September followed by a working group meeting in October. Staff hopes to begin scoping the issues before the end of the year, which will include more public meetings. She asked members to give input on ways to inform users and the public about these upcoming meetings and the research area process. It was suggested that staff present the information at constituent meetings, such as sport fishing and dive club meetings. Other avenues include newsletter, such as the one Capt. Judy Helmey produces on email.

Discussion followed with suggestions coming from law enforcement representatives and others to keep the boundaries of any research area simple and easy to find. Spud Woodward noted that the problem with buoys is that they also focus bait and boaters. Others suggested that adequate buffer will be needed around the actual area for research, reminding everyone of the photo displayed by Dr. Brian Keller of boaters fishing on the immediate edge of a closed area in the Florida Keys.

Tim Tarver expressed concern from the fishing community about the length of time for closure if such an area is designated. It was explained that no decision has been made and will not be made until the full public process is complete, but that all options – a sunset provision, adaptive management, permanent closure, etc. – will be discussed. Staff also reminded everyone that the required review of all sanctuary management plans every five years, will bring that issue to the surface repeatedly over time.

Public Comment

No public comment was offered.

Closing Remarks

Joe Kimmel reported that the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council had just met and reviewed a variety of amendments and actions including: Snapper Grouper Amendment 14, which would establish eight deepwater marine protected areas off the Southeast coast; Snapper Grouper Amendment 15, which would address overfishing in the vermilion snapper and gag fisheries; and Snapper Grouper Amendment 16, which would consider limited access privilege programs in snapper grouper fisheries.

Clark Alexander reported that the R/V NANCY FOSTER cruise was very productive. Despite some equipment failures, they were able to finish the sub-bottom profile of the sanctuary.

The meeting was adjourned at noon.

** NOTE: Dr. Danny Gleason has also expressed concerns about the "Description of Findings" column. For example, he has noted in the past that the "basis for judgment" does not justify the "description of findings" for items 1, 4, 5, or 13 (of the draft condition report). In several cases he feels the term "pristine" or "near-pristine" is the big offender. In cases where there is only baseline data, it is not possible to say whether the ecosystem is pristine or impacted. There are other cases where the first part of the statement in the description of findings is reasonable, but then the attached clause confuses the issues. Item #s 6 and 9 are good examples of this.*