



Report In Brief

U.S. Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General

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Why We Did This Review

We evaluated the program's effectiveness and examined selected activities to determine whether they are efficient. We focused on whether the program is accomplishing its core statutory objective of providing long-term protection of marine and cultural resources. We also identified constraints that inhibit the program's ability to accomplish its statutory objectives.

Background

The National Marine Sanctuary System manages 13 marine sanctuaries and one national monument, ranging in size from one-quarter square mile in American Samoa's Fagatele Bay to more than 5,300 square miles in Monterey Bay, California. At 138,000 square miles, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument—added in 2006—is the largest marine protected area in the world. The sanctuaries and marine monument now encompass more than 158,000 square miles of ocean and Great Lakes marine habitats. The special habitats of the sanctuaries include deep ocean and near-shore coral reefs, whale migration corridors, and deep sea canyons.

To view the full report, visit www.oig.doc.gov/oig/reports/2008/IPE-18591.pdf

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

National Marine Sanctuary Program Protects Certain Resources, But Further Actions Could Increase Protection (IPE-18591)

What We Found

We found the National Marine Sanctuary Program (NMSP) has successfully protected certain components of marine ecosystems and certain cultural resources under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act. The program effectively complements other federal, state, and local resource protection efforts by offering benefits other laws or regulations do not. However, we identified some areas where management improvements are needed, including the following:

Enforcement of sanctuary regulations needs to be strengthened. Enforcement challenges in the sanctuaries range from permit compliance to offshore vessel traffic to a range of natural resource injuries, including oil spills, vessel groundings, and plane crashes. Most sanctuary and enforcement officials and other stakeholders we spoke to believe that enforcement of sanctuary regulations remains a challenge and could be improved.

Management of the sanctuary program has significantly improved, but several issues require more attention. For example, management plan reviews at all the sanctuaries have not been completed within the 5-year statutory requirement, although we noted that the sanctuary program is devoting additional resources to complete them. We also found that several sanctuary sites have not been able to secure outyear maintenance and operational funding for vessels, buoys, and visitor facilities. Finally, we identified opportunities that may exist for NOAA to obtain declassified Navy maps of sea floors in and around certain sanctuaries.

What We Recommended

We made 19 recommendations for actions we believe will strengthen the marine sanctuary program. For example, we recommended that the NMSP director

- direct each sanctuary to create a law enforcement working group of federal and state law enforcement partners and other appropriate stakeholders, as part of the sanctuary advisory council.
- hold superintendents that have ongoing management plan reviews accountable for completing them within established timeframes.

We also recommended NOAA request that the U.S. Navy review its high resolution bathymetry data classification policy for areas important to NOAA and determine whether the Navy's data can be made available to NOAA and its partners.