

John Williamson presented the ZWG update and provided the following summary for the 28th SAC Minutes:

Since the last SAC meeting, the Zoning Working Group has met twice, in May and again on September 30.

As you may recall from the SAC discussion in February, the ZWG arose out of the discussions of the Ecosystem-based Management Working Group and the Ecosystem Alteration Working Group. Both groups recognized the need to consider the use of zoning to either restore ecological integrity or to establish reference areas, sites that act as “experimental controls” for ecological monitoring, within the sanctuary. Strategy 2.1 of the EA Action Plan calls for developing a process to establish reference areas that serve as benchmarks for discerning human and natural impacts on habitat (DMP:216). Strategy 4.1 of the EBM Action Plan calls for continuing to convene the zoning working group of the advisory council established in 2004 to: (1) evaluate the adequacy of existing zoning schemes in SBNMS, (2) address the scientific requirements to meet the goals of EBSM and, if needed (3) develop a modified zoning scheme including consideration of fully protected reserves.

The SAC’s charge to the ZWG is to evaluate the adequacy of existing zoning schemes for protecting ecological integrity and benthic habitat and make a recommendation to the SAC on the need for zones in the SBNMS within two years of publication of the Final Management Plan. A process was specified by the SAC that the ZWG was to follow to make its recommendation.

1. ZWG convenes and assigns a subgroup to come up with 2-3 operational definitions of ecological integrity with measurable parameters.
2. Subgroup makes recommendation on definition of ecological integrity appropriate for the SBNMS.
3. ZWG evaluates existing zoning scheme based on agreed upon criteria associated with the scientific requirements and goals of EBSM.
4. ZWG makes recommendation to SAC on adequacy of existing zoning scheme.
5. SAC makes recommendation to superintendent on adequacy of existing zoning scheme and future of the ZWG.
6. If necessary, the ZWG continues deliberations to develop a modified zoning scheme (including a consideration of fully protected reserves) for the purpose of meeting the scientific requirements and goals of EBSM within 2 years of final management plan implementation.

As of its meeting in August 2006, the ZWG had made it to step 2. After that the ZWG took a 3-year hiatus due to the staff being caught up with DMP submission. At its meeting in May, the re-convened ZWG (most of its former members agreed to continue the work) took up the task of identifying existing zones in the Sanctuary created by NOAA Fisheries for fishery management or marine mammal protection. – industry members also added defacto zones where fishing rarely occurs to be included in the mix.

All of these existing zones have very specific purposes short of the Sanctuary's overarching goal for preserving ecological integrity. At the September meeting the ZWG examined each of these individual zones which partially or fully overlap the Sanctuary. In doing the evaluation, we used several criteria suggested by the Sanctuary staff and ended up amending these questions as we progressed. These were:

- 1) Does the zone contain a sufficient area of each of the four main habitat types such that each can support a viable benthic community and be monitored adequately?
- 2) Is it sufficiently protected from human disturbance for the intact biological communities to be considered to be representative of a natural or unperturbed state?
- 3) Is it of sufficient size to adequately restore and protect historical marine communities within it?
- 4) Does it contribute to functional resilience for the rest of the sanctuary?
- 5) Is it of sufficient size to provide spillover of biomass to surrounding areas?
- 6) Is it of sufficient size to provide a buffer for biological communities inside the zone from surrounding fishing activities?

No one of these existing zones does the job in itself but most contribute something to the Sanctuary's goals for EBM. At the next ZWG meeting we will examine the cumulative benefits of these existing zones together as well as try to identify the contribution of unfished areas in the Sanctuary. However, the likelihood is that the ZWG will determine that existing zoning does not rise to the level of comprehensive protection for ecological integrity or provide a reasonable starting place for monitoring and experimentation to develop the comprehensive protection over time. If that is the consensus finding of the ZWG, we will move on to the next step of our charge, which is to develop recommendations to the SAC for a determination on the adequacy of existing zones and for a strategy to meet the "scientific requirements and goals of EBSM within 2 years of final management plan implementation".