

International Programs

Sister Sanctuary Agreement Established in French Antilles

In September 2011, NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and France's Marine Protected Areas Agency signed a sister sanctuary agreement to protect endangered humpback whales that migrate annually between NOAA's Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary and the Agoa Marine Mammal Sanctuary in the French Antilles. This area includes the islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Martin and St. Barthelemy at the Caribbean's eastern edge. The sanctuary's name, Agoa, refers to the goddess of the sea in Amerindian mythology.

Both sanctuaries provide critical support for the North Atlantic population of humpback whales, which spend spring and summer at Stellwagen Bank and other northern feeding grounds before heading south to the warmer waters of the Caribbean Sea in late fall to mate and give birth to their young.

The Agoa Marine Mammal Sanctuary was created in September 2010, in recognition of the vast diversity of marine mammal species present in the French Antilles and the Caribbean in general, and of the potential threats facing these marine mammals and their habitats. The entire 138,000 square-kilometer French Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Caribbean is currently defined as a critical habitat for marine mammals. In all, 21 of the 28 cetacean species, including baleen whales, dolphins and other toothed whales, that can be found in the Caribbean Sea have been documented in the French Antilles. Some of these species are year-round residents, others are seasonal visitors, and still others simply pass through the waters around these islands.

Agoa was created consistent with the objectives of the Convention for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment of the Wider Caribbean (the Cartagena Convention) and its Protocol on Specially Protected Areas for Wildlife (SPAW), and the United



The objective of the sanctuary is to ensure the conservation of marine mammals, within the framework of a harmonious co-existence with human activities. Today hunting is no longer practiced in French waters, but other threats include an increase in maritime traffic, noise pollution, pollution of the marine environment, degradation of habitats, and an increase in whale watching. Within Agoa, provisions will be made to remove or reduce the negative effects of the activities having an impact on the well being of marine mammals or the integrity of their population.

Under the auspices of UNEP's SPAW Protocol, the sister sanctuary agreement will help improve humpback whale recovery in the North Atlantic by providing new avenues for collaborative education, scientific and management efforts, including joint research and monitoring programs.

French Antilles Website: <http://www.aire-marines.fr/>
Press: http://stellwagen.noaa.gov/sister/pdfs/french_press.pdf
MOU: http://stellwagen.noaa.gov/sister/pdfs/french_mou.pdf

Nations Environment Program's Marine Mammal Action Plan (MMAP) for the Caribbean region, which recognizes the importance of protecting critical humpback whale habitats and migratory corridors.

This effort will help improve knowledge about humpbacks in the Atlantic and the threats they face from both natural and man-made changes to their environment. NOAA anticipates the relationship will be crucial to the long-term conservation of the North Atlantic humpback whale population, as well as to the development of future cooperative agreements with other countries.