

Resource Conservation

Sister Sanctuaries Work to Protect Endangered Whales

North Atlantic Humpbacks Find Havens at Migratory Endpoints

For the first time, two nations have joined forces to protect an endangered migratory marine mammal on both ends of its range. This species without borders is the humpback whale.

NOAA's Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary was designated by Congress in 1992, while the Santuario de Mamíferos Marinos de la República Dominicana (translation: Marine Mammal Sanctuary of the Dominican Republic) was first designated in a smaller configuration in 1986 and expanded in 1996. Late in 2007, the two nations signed an international accord to work together to protect this charismatic species. In 2011, the Stellwagen Bank sanctuary signed a sister sanctuary agreement with the French Antilles Agoa Marine Mammal Sanctuary along with a Letter of Intent, expanding the sister sanctuary program and creating a marine mammal protected areas (MMPA) network for the Wider Caribbean Region – the first such MMPA network in the world.

Humpback whales are long-distance migrants, but highly faithful to specific feeding and breeding areas. Long-term research shows that many individuals spend spring and summer in the rich feeding grounds of the Stellwagen Bank sanctuary, and then migrate 1,500 miles south in late fall to the warmer waters of the Dominican Republic and other breeding grounds in the Caribbean Sea to mate and give birth to their young. There are approximately 1,000 humpback whales common to both marine protected areas.

The first documented sighting of a whale from Stellwagen Bank on Silver Bank off the Dominican Republic was "Salt" in the 1970s. Since then, researchers have found that a significant number of mother-calf pairs from Dominican waters make the trip to Stellwagen Bank, where the young learn to feed and mothers regain weight after their winter-long fast and nursing period.

The sister sanctuary program is working toward increasing public awareness and support for marine mammal conservation through joint research, monitoring, education and capacity-building programs designed to enhance coordination and help improve endangered humpback whale recovery in the North Atlantic.



(Top) Salt was the first Stellwagen Bank humpback whale identified off the Dominican Republic. (Bottom) Map shows the humpback whale migratory route between Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, Bermuda, the Marine Mammal Sanctuary of the Dominican Republic and the French Antilles Agoa Marine Mammal Sanctuary. Sister sanctuary agreements help increase public awareness and encourage cooperative programs.

The sister sanctuary model promotes a strategy that defines emerging problems beyond Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), kindles commitment to critical habitats, and manifests the true spirit of regional cooperation, which is a key element to ensure effective management for biodiversity protection and the conservation of migratory, marine mammal species.

The sister sanctuary concept is part of a larger international global vision of Marine Mammal Marine Protected Areas (MM/MPAs) worldwide. The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) has cited the sister sanctuary agreement as an important mechanism to maintain connections between marine protected areas and to protect migratory endangered species that cross international boundaries.