

FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY ADVISORY COUNCIL

MEETING NOTES
Tuesday, December 12, 2023

Marathon City Council Chambers
Marathon, FL 33050

Attendees:

Council Members:

Boating Industry: Ken Reda
Citizen at Large – Upper Keys: Kate DeLoach (absent)
Citizen at Large – Middle Keys: George Garrett
Citizen at Large – Lower Keys: Mimi Stafford
Conservation and Environment (seat 1): Ben Daughtry
Conservation and Environment (seat 2): Jerry Lorenz (absent)
Diving – Upper Keys: Seanna Knight (absent)
Diving – Lower Keys: Joe Weatherby (absent)
Education and Outreach: Shelly Krueger
Fishing – Charter Fishing Flats Guide: Will Benson
Fishing – Charter Sport Fishing: Greg Eklund
Fishing – Commercial – Marine/Tropical: Ken Nedimyer
Fishing – Commercial – Shell/Scale: Daniel Padron (absent)
Fishing – Recreational: Karen Angle (absent)
Research and Monitoring: Erinn Muller
South Florida Ecosystem Restoration: Kelly Cox
Submerged Cultural Resources: Diane Silvia
Tourism – Upper Keys: Lisa Mongelia
Tourism – Lower Keys: Andy Newman
Elected County Official: Jim Scholl

Council Alternates (present):

Citizen at Large – Upper Keys: Jessica Dockery
Conservation and Environment (seat 2): Caitlin Lustic
Diving – Lower Keys: Lucja Rice
Education and Outreach: Dora DeMaria
Fishing – Charter Fishing Flats Guide: Bob Beighley
Fishing – Charter Sport Fishing: Brian McCadie
Fishing – Commercial – Shell/Scale: Jerome Young
Fishing – Recreational: Gary Jennings
Research and Monitoring: Karen Neely
South Florida Ecosystem Restoration: Marisa Carrozzo

Submerged Cultural Resources: Sara Ayers-Rigsby

Agency Representatives (present):

Florida DEP: Nick Parr
Florida FWC Fisheries/FWRI: CJ Sweetman
Florida FWC Dept Law Enforcement: Capt. David Dipre
NOAA OLE: Officers Justin Powell
National Park Service: Tylan Dean
US Coast Guard: ENS Jordan Haas
US Navy: Wendy Wheatley-Techmer

Municipalities (present):

City of Layton: Councilwoman Cynthia Lewis
City of Key Colony Beach: Mayor Pro-tem Beth Ramsay-Vickrey

I. CALL TO ORDER, ROLL CALL, CHAIRPERSON’S COMMENTS

The meeting was opened with the Pledge of Allegiance and called to order with roll call at 9:05 am. Council chair George Garrett introduced the agenda for this meeting as well as the notes from the October meeting for council approval, both were motioned, seconded, and subsequently approved. Lisa Mongelia made the motion to approve the October notes with no edits, with a second from Jim Scholl. Ken Nedimyer made the motion to adopt the agenda for this meeting with a second from Tylan Dean.

Sarah Fangman and council chair George Garrett recognized a former council member, Chris Bergh, and presented him with a plaque for his many years of service to the council and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Chris was acknowledged for his thoughtfulness, knowledge, and ability to navigate difficult issues throughout his tenure, while doing so respectfully and in consideration of the needs of the community. Chris Bergh highlighted how beneficial his time on the council was and encouraged the current members to be engaged and advise the agencies involved in the council. Andy Newman also acknowledged Chris’ contributions, and shared that he helped the TDC evolve and be more focused on stewardship and contributing to solutions. 11 other prior members were recognized with plaques as well but were not in attendance today.

George noted that we have four new members joining the council this month: Greg Eklund, Brian McCadie, Jerome Young, and Ben Murray. George invited the council to go around the room and introduce themselves. Each council member introduced their seat, their community affiliation, and shared any recent updates from their sector.

In addition to introductions, recent updates shared included the following:

- Wendy Wheatley-Techmer, NASKW. NASKW is planning a National Public Lands Day event in January 2024, exotic vegetation removal, habitat restoration, and annual lower Keys marsh rabbit survey.
- Nick Parr, Florida DEP. At the last SAC meeting, the Coupon Bight Aquatic Preserve draft management plan was presented. Comments have been incorporated and this will be presented to the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) in February. Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserve will be presented to ARC this fall.
- Tylan Dean, National Park Service. The reefs are still recovering from the bleaching event at Dry Tortugas; that will be an ongoing challenge. Biscayne NP will reach out to FKNMS to coordinate on natural resource monitoring programs. The parks hosted the UNESCO Director at Everglades NP last week, where Everglades restoration and water quality were discussed. Several infrastructure updates are in progress or coming soon. These include:
 - The Flamingo visitor center was recently completed in Everglades NP,
 - Work will be starting soon to repair the moat wall at Dry Tortugas NP,
 - Everglades City visitor center recently broke ground.
- Sarah Fangman, FKNMS. The sanctuary is in the process of hiring a new manager for the Eco-Discovery Center who will start in January. The Deputy Superintendent position is also undergoing recruitment. The director of the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, John Armor, will be in the Keys next week for briefings on the Restoration Blueprint. Restoration Blueprint Updates: we are copy editing the management plan, the text for the Final Environmental Impact Statement is being edited, the response to comments has been drafted, etc. The team is actively doing a lot of work on the pieces associated with the final rule which we hope to have out and final in 2024. After completion of the Restoration Blueprint there will still be challenges and other issues to be addressed, but we are happy to be bringing this phase of the process to a close in the next year.
- CJ Sweetman, FWC Marine Fisheries Management. At the last Commission meeting, the FWC appointed a new Assistant Executive Director and Chief Conservation Officer. Other items on the agenda included updates from the recent Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council meeting, where two final actions were taken. First, an amendment was passed to implement commercial electronic reporting in lieu of paper logbooks for several fisheries. The council also took action on Gulf greater amberjack, which has been overfished for a long time. A gag grouper framework update is in progress as well.
- Dave Dipre, FWC Department of Law Enforcement. Welcome new members, please remember to contact FWC to report any violations on the water. Currently, there are over 100 active derelict vessel cases from Key Largo to Key West; officers are working to document and work on each.

- ENS Jordan Haas, USCG. There will be greater cutter presence in the Keys in the next year. This will allow more ability to divert to resource protection and living marine resource missions.

Council coordinator Liz Trueblood noted that a new SAC recruitment will begin in January for positions whose term is ending in June 2024. She also announced that the sanctuary is working on website updates. As part of this, we would like to include more information about the SAC members. Historically, we have included each member's name and council seat; now we would like to expand that to also include title and affiliation.

II. SOUTH FLORIDA ECOSYSTEM CONNECTIVITY TEAM, WORKING GROUP UPDATES AND RESOLUTION

George introduced Marisa Carrozzo, who is the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration seat Alternate to the SAC to present the Connectivity Team's Resolution.

Marisa shared that during the last Connectivity Team meeting, Dr. Wes Brooks gave a presentation on state coral reef initiatives, and the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force (SFERTF), including the new Coral Reef Coordination Team which has worked on water quality over the past year. Notes from this meeting will be available online for anyone interested.

This resolution was a joint effort by members of the Connectivity Team. The bottom line is the urgent need to adopt and implement the Restoration Blueprint, considering the marine heat wave and other new challenges faced this year. It has been a year since the Advisory Council sat down to put together their draft consensus recommendations on that document, so the Connectivity Team has identified this as a good time to re-engage this issue. Marisa summarized the content of the resolution, and specifically reviewed the 'Therefore' clause of the document. The SAC was invited to offer input on the resolution which was incorporated into the resolution text. Discussion not captured in the updated resolution is summarized here.

Council Discussion / Q&A:

Q: Will Benson emphasized the prioritization of appropriate resources by the co-managers of the sanctuary. Each agency should dedicate the necessary resources to bring the Restoration Blueprint across the finish line. The recommendations from the SAC were slightly different than the draft rule. This group has a great deal of experience and knowledge, and they put forth a complete set of recommendations to guide the agencies moving forward. Again, requests this input be carefully considered and that a consensus be reached between the state and federal agencies.

Q: Greg Eklund: Requests to add a ‘whereas’ clause that mentions that artificial habitat restoration is a priority. From a fisherman's standpoint, this is important. There is a lot of money available from the county and state for artificial reefs right now, and it is important to move forward on this issue and to permit that process. Artificial habitat restoration was vague in the Restoration Blueprint and this should be strengthened. We had a huge bleaching event and have lost a lot of habitat in the past few months; there is another El Nino event coming next summer. Habitat restoration needs to be addressed. Sees an opportunity to make this better.

A: Marisa asked for clarification about whether this is part of the SAC’s December 2022 recommendations?

- Will noted this group had a consensus around habitat restoration in the 2022 document. This included language about artificial/marine habitat restoration.
- Marisa reiterated that the resolution references the SAC recommendation document, which includes comments on habitat restoration.
- Chris Bergh, Eco-Connectivity Team member, rephrased Greg’s question. The SAC commented on the Restoration Blueprint, what Greg has requested is in this recommendations already.
- Andy Newman agrees with an add on to include artificial reefing; thinks the state would be favorable to idea of interfacing artificial habitat with coral reef restoration.
- Mimi noted a concern about including artificial reefs here. There is so much habitat that we can improve upon and work with/enable. Places where artificial reefs have been successful are the barren zones off coastal areas where the reef structure does not exist. This depends on the purpose and function of the artificial reef in how it’s placed. You don’t necessarily increase biomass, you are just concentrating it. Conservation, habitat restoration is one objective; if this is for harvest, that does not necessarily improve the ecosystem. We are not clear on what we want to do with this yet, unclear if this has been embraced by the sanctuary. Concern this is too specific for this document.
- Andy Newman: No one who is an artificial reefs proponent says we should stop coral restoration. This is intended to acknowledge that there is a place in the Blueprint for this; this would include permitted, responsible placements. This is one tool in the tool box.
- Kelly Cox: In the interest of time, requested this not devolve into a discussion on the merits of artificial reefs, as that occurred last year. This amendment is consistent with the recommendations from this council previously. Whether each member agrees with each recommendation is a different story; there has been a lot of compromise.
- George noted that artificial reefs are planned as an agenda topic in the coming year.

Motion to vote made by: Kelly Cox

Second: Greg Eklund

Voting result: all in favor with 19 voting members present

III. MISSION: ICONIC REEFS - ICONIC REEF GUARDIANS PROGRAM UPDATES

George introduced Maddie Chohnoky, Mission: Iconic Reefs Stewardship Manager and John Reinbott of the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation to present updates on the Iconic Reef Guardians program, including how it was developed, the online platform, how it was impacted by the bleaching event, and how conservation is being incorporated into dive shop business plans.

FKNMS oversees Mission: Iconic Reefs, as well as the Blue Star program. Blue Star was established by FKNMS to recognize tour operators who are committed to responsible and sustainable fishing, diving and snorkeling operations. Blue Star operators make an extra commitment to stewardship. This program is an opportunity for Blue Star operators to engage further in reef restoration work with their customers.

In order to join IRG, professional divers associated with a Blue Star shop complete an online training module similar to those offered by dive speciality certifications. Then, in-water checkout dives are conducted to ensure course requirements are met. The training platform allows quantification of the awareness gained by their engagement with the online platform. Familiarity with causes of coral decline in the Florida Keys increased following completion of the IRG training; after which divers reported familiarity or strong familiarity. Similar shifts were observed for familiarity with what divers and snorkelers can do to support coral reef restoration. These metrics demonstrate the efficacy of IRG, and help identify areas for improved training opportunities.

Once a professional diver has completed and passed online training requirements, they move on to an in-water portion. They must demonstrate a number of skills to be approved to take clients on an IRG trip. Maddie led the audience through a virtual coral nursery tour, as conducted by a trained IRG professional, including viewing coral trees, being equipped with tools to clean coral trees (also practiced in the classroom), and caring for baby corals outplanted at an MIR site. A reef experience involves removing marine debris, conducting invertebrate surveys, and monitoring coral health. IRG consists of three different in-water experiences. The first is 'passive coral nursery' experience, which involves a passive tour of a coral nursery, where they visually enjoy the nursery and learn about the ongoing work there. The second is 'active coral nursery' experience. This is in development currently, but will entail a dive experience that includes nursery maintenance such as cleaning coral trees. Finally, a 'reef experience' will include maintenance and monitoring at active MIR restoration sites. This experience, too, is still under development with an eye toward contributions that will best help these areas in the long term.

Two Blue Star dive shops have been selected to work alongside three coral restoration practitioners as part of the pilot for this program. This has shown great success and a strong interest.

Unfortunately, the marine heat wave in July caused the IRG passive experiences to be halted as restoration practitioners reorganized to respond to the bleaching event. The program is still working to figure out the process for reimplementing the program, including how to best support these nurseries. IRG is also partnering with [SEAFAN](#) to develop a coral bleaching experience. This course will teach participants about coral bleaching, the impact it has, and how they can help. Participants will survey corals and submit data to SEAFAN, which supports understanding of and response to coral bleaching events.

Dive operators have expressed their interest in the program as a way to emphasize their responsibility toward conservation; this also helps retain staff who are passionate about the marine environment. There has been great interest from the community. Partnerships with restoration practitioners have also increased program participation and awareness among locals and visitors alike.

Council Discussion / Q&A:

Q: Erinn Muller: How many participants have you had so far?

A: 20 have participated thus far. The program launched last December but many trips had to be canceled early in the year due to poor weather. The summer heat wave further delayed the rollout; however more participants will be incorporated in the future.

Q: Lisa Mongelia: How many operators are involved?

A: Currently two dive shops, who applied and were selected by a review team. As the program is developed, this opportunity will be made available to others in the future. The coral bleaching experience will be the first program that provides this additional opportunity, as this will be rolled out as the nursery areas are reassessed.

Q: Erinn Muller: How are people responding to the passive tours, are they happy with them even without getting to outplant?

A: People have expressed excitement about both. The passive experiences have been key for the restoration practitioners to gain confidence that this can be done responsibly. As people complete passive tours, if they express an interest in a more active experience, information can be shared with them about other upcoming events, such as the opportunities directly with a restoration practitioner.

Q: And is this benefitting the restoration practitioners as well?

A: IRG participants are encouraged to give a small donation. Half goes to the restoration practitioner, and half goes to M:IR. Ken Nedimyer added that it is really helpful to have educated people who have already seen the nursery. Having this awareness is a huge benefit to the restoration practitioners. Although there isn't much in the nurseries right now because of the response efforts from the heat wave, the nursery tours will be relaunched once those the nurseries are able to be reestablished. The program also allows this to be done in an incremental way, including first training the dive professionals. Overall, restoration practitioners support this effort to help expand their restoration programs.

Q: Lisa Mongelia added that a lot of people come down to the Keys and are one and done. However, they are so enthusiastic about the reef, that they go back to where they came from and tell people about it. This program is great for encouraging more awareness and discussion of coral reef issues. This is a much-needed tool and opportunity for interaction for the public.

A: Maddie noted that the active experiences are also being developed currently. The team is working with the restoration practitioners to assess what the active/hands on components will entail, both in the nursery and on the reef.

IV. FKNMS MARITIME HERITAGE MANAGEMENT UPDATE

George welcomed FKNMS maritime heritage team members Matt Lawrence and Brenda Altmeier for updates from their program.

Maritime heritage is interconnected with other aspects of FKNMS. We would not have the cultural heritage on our shores if not for our coral reefs. The reefs led to lighthouses and shipwrecks which help tell this history of the Florida Keys. Keys maritime heritage is vast and stretches back as far as 15,000 years ago; at that time sea level was 300 feet lower than it is currently, and indigenous peoples walked on what are now submerged lands. There are many documented pre-contact sites on upland areas of the Keys as well. Shipwrecks document the European colonial period, to the development of the United States, to the modern period where we have increasing levels of maritime activity in the Keys including from the early 20th century to WWII. Historic offshore structures like lighthouses and beacons are iconic symbols of this area's maritime heritage, placed along the reefs to warn sailors away from treacherous waters.

Matt reviewed a number of definitions for historical resources. Such resources include shipwrecks, aircraft on the seafloor, aids to navigation, and pre-contact indigenous sites; these all tell us more about our shared past. These are non-renewable resources; these are part of who we are and how we interacted with the marine environment in the past. Historical resources are important because they give us unique information about the past, including the less-known stories of everyday people. They also provide exciting recreational and educational opportunities, attract tourism, and increase opportunities for non-consumptive commerce. Folks

can continue to visit these sites, and if done responsibly, future generations will be able to visit them as well.

Management of historical resources includes first inventorying these resources; we need to know what and where they are in order to properly manage them. There are several hundred sites documented, and it's estimated that thousands of shipwrecks have occurred within the sanctuary.

FKNMS regulations prohibit removal of historical resources. Destruction of archaeological sites robs the American people of their heritage. Unfortunately, people often have false perceptions of underwater archaeological sites, including the "finders keepers" mentality (that it's theirs to have) or that they are being slowly destroyed by the environment anyways. Part of the interpretation and education that the maritime heritage team participates in is to share the importance of leaving these items in place and how to enjoy and study them responsibly. Improper use has led to losses at these sites and our cultural heritage. The North America shipwreck (east of Sombrero Reef) is in 10-12 feet of water and is a fantastic snorkeling site. Unfortunately in the past few years, they have seen increasing levels of looting. Matt requested support from the SAC for the protection of these sites by helping to report any illegal or damaging activity, and by sharing their importance.

Brenda highlighted some recent successes including the team's research partnership with non-profit Diving with a Purpose. Through DWP, FKNMS is able to engage with 25-30 divers per year. Over the course of a week, these divers are trained in archaeological techniques and help support sanctuary research projects. In the past two years, two different sites have been documented and mapped during the Diving with a Purpose programs. This detailed investigation allows us to learn new things about these shipwrecks. Another research partnership has been with the U.S. Navy via the Naval History and Heritage Command, to investigate the U.S.S. Alligator, an iconic shipwreck in the vicinity of Alligator Reef. Large areas are being surveyed to hopefully identify the location of the U.S.S. Alligator. Most recently, MHP has worked with ECU who conducted their fall field school out of Mote Marine Lab. The partnership allowed the team to investigate sites at American Shoal and Looe Key, and to document shipwrecks with new techniques. This included documentation of the HMS Looe to determine the status of the wreck and bring new technology to bear. A new site was discovered near American Shoal, a mid- 19th century vessel and the student divers were able to document it as well. The North America shipwreck site was also documented in higher resolution, which will help provide a baseline against which to measure possible looting in the future.

Brenda also highlighted the importance of connecting with the local community in this work, and reviewed a number of recent initiatives to do so. The maritime heritage team conducts Heritage Awareness Diving Seminars annually, which now include in person and virtual heritage awareness training. These modules cover maritime archaeology, shipwrecks, how shipwrecks

degrade overtime, and how divers can help preserve and protect them. This is conducted in partnership with the Florida Public Archaeology Network (FPAN). The team also supports the Submerged Heritage Monitoring Scouts Program, originally developed by FPAN to address climate change-initiated impacts on cultural resources. This program trains people as observers so they can check on these resources and report any issues that should be addressed due to sea level rise or other changing conditions. A program was also conducted with John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park (JPCRSP) staff so they can monitor their heritage sites within the park.

The [Shipwreck Trail](#) includes nine sites, which were specifically selected as stable sites that are fully documented. Information about the sites is available on the FKNMS website, to support interpretation of these areas. JPCRSP also partnered with the maritime heritage team on a new exhibit at the visitor center, which sees almost 160,000 visitors per year. This exhibit focuses on upper Keys maritime history and the Gurrero shipwreck. The renovated FKNMS Eco-Discovery Center also includes maritime heritage information and artifacts as part of the exhibit. Partner organizations also host artifacts, including: The Key Largo Chamber of Commerce (cannon); Florida Keys History and Discovery Center (downstairs exhibit with artifacts from 1862 vessel with union soldiers heading to New Orleans, as well as the Queen of Nassau); Crane Point Hammock and Nature Center (part of the 1733 Coffins Patch Collection); Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Museum (part of the 1733 Coffins Patch Collection). Combined visitation at these 4 locations in 2023 was 180,000. The sanctuary has also partnered with Florida High Adventure SeaBase, which has 16,000 participants each year, on a new poster exhibit. A 16 minute video on maritime history has also been created to support training with the Monroe County Sheriff officers on the identification of historical resources, and tools used in the treasure hunting trade. An ocean podcast was also created on the FKNMS maritime history, and a number of newspaper pieces have been published in the past year.

Council Discussion / Q&A:

Q: Andy Newman: TDC can help with these efforts and invited an opportunity to collaborate. Asked why the Vandenburg and Spiegel Grove were not in this presentation or included in the shipwreck trail? These are significant shipwrecks for the Florida Keys, although they were intentionally sunk. Regarding Alligator Reef lighthouse restoration, permit requests may be forthcoming. How do you view this from an MHP perspective?

A: Matt acknowledged the interest in adding these to the shipwreck trail; this needs to be consistent with what is offered for other ships on the trail. This interest and historical perspective of these wrecks could augment the other sites. MHP is thrilled that a community organization is stepping up to take over stewardship of this iconic lighthouse. Hope to partner in the future to use this venue to help interpret the shipwrecks in the area of this lighthouse; this speaks to the importance of ensuring we are correctly interpreting the resources in this area.

Q: Lisa Mongelia: Other artificial reefs are on the shipwreck trail - like the Duane. The San Pedro was recreated to allow folks to see what a ship from this historic fleet would look like. Are other sites like this going to be developed or recreated to add to cultural heritage interpretation?

A: Acknowledge the interest in adding artifacts to create an attraction; no current plans to develop another recreation currently. The San Pedro is an actual shipwreck that had concrete cannons and a historical anchor added to it. We also hope to do more to interpret the sites and what is there currently (e.g. virtual reality work) to make these accessible to anyone around the nation.

- Nick Parr (Florida DEP) noted that San Pedro is part of a state park, so this has a greater level of protection and also speaks to how this recreation was possible.

Q: Lisa Mongelia: Now that wood is exposed, whether intentionally or by a storm, can they be recovered to be protected, or do we have to leave them as is to deteriorate?

A: Working on figuring out the best ways to stabilize material on the American and possibly rebury it to protect it.

Q: Sarah Ayers Rigsby: We are fortunate to have this historical record in the Keys. Regarding looting or disturbing these sites, what are the steps to make that known?

A: Justin Powell - take pictures of the vessel if it can be done safely; document what you see and the area where they are working. Don't be timid about reporting these observations; the reports are currently few and far between and any new information can help connect the dots.

- NOAA MHP would also like to be made aware so they can coordinate with others among colleagues and the community. In the past, social media posts have resulted in cases being made against violations.

Q: Greg Eklund: Noted that less than 50 FWC officers patrol this large sanctuary. There is a lot of information that could be collated from people on the water every day; a common location to report that would be helpful, e.g., something like dialing “*I-SEE” for example on a phone. From a user perspective, current methods for reporting are not known or simple. Request investigation into a single channel.

A: Dipre noted there are a number of methods already available, including an app to send messages to the FWC dispatch center. These channels could be better publicized.

Q: Jeff Turner: Regarding the observations of change at sites over a year, these areas are often impacted by storms and wave action. This may not be due to looting or improper use; they are often uncovered and recovered naturally.

A: Matt noted that this site showed very specific signatures of human interaction, including how individual rocks are moved and spread in small areas vs. more broadly, as would be the case with wave energy.

Q: Thanks to the internet, there are no secrets. Have you considered adding plaques to wrecks to explain what is there and why it should be left in place?

A: Immediate signage on shipwrecks has been considered. Biscayne NP has monuments on their shipwreck trail sites. Coordinates for shipwrecks are available online, along with other information about the importance of not damaging historical resources. Due to the volume of wrecks, signage on everything would be a challenge. The focus now is improving education and outreach among the users; while some sites may be specifically targeted for additional in-water messaging.

Sarah Fangman shared that ONMS director John Armor is visiting next week. He will be honoring Brenda with the Silver Sherman award for excellence in her dedication to the work we do.

V. PUBLIC COMMENT OPPORTUNITY

George opened the floor for public comment. He reminded the council and the audience that this is an opportunity for the council to hear from our community members. This is not a time for dialog and discourse, rather it is a time for the council to listen.

Commenter: Andy Newman, on behalf of Monroe County Tourism Development Council

Andy Newman shared a statement regarding the recent Tourism Development Council audit. Andy shared that he and his staff will continue to serve the TDC's public relation needs despite recent challenges.

The Keys Traveler magazine is produced each year, both in print and as an [online PDF](#). This year's edition includes a feature on Mission: Iconic Reefs (courtesy of Scott Atwell), as well as a story on the sanctuary's Blue Star Program (also contributed by Scott Atwell). Mr. Newman also highlighted the "Letter from a Fish" story from Doug Kelly. This creatively discusses fish conservation. This exemplifies the TDCs approach to highlight sustainability and promote FKNMS.

Commenter: Chris Bergh, the Nature Conservancy

Sea level rise is a challenge. Figuring out how to restore coral reefs, how to design artificial reefs, how to deal with water quality issues, and balance fishing and boating impacts, sea level rise is a major challenge. Archaeological sites are being assessed; Monroe County is currenting evaluating what we can do with our roads, Mr. Bergh is part of a group investigating what to do with species who have no other native habitat except the Florida Keys. Historically, sea level rose an average of 1 inch per century; but has risen 1 foot in the last century, which is also the projection for the next 50 years. Marathon is 8 feet above sea level, which is high ground. Sea level rise will soon affect water quality as erosion mobilizes sediments which carry pollutants to

waterways. This land will become future habitat; need this to be a good constructive part of the sanctuary before it gets inundated. The Water Quality Protection Program is thinking about this; and the SAC should be aware as well.

- George Garrett: Noted that on November 29th, he had conflicting meetings between a mediation meeting and the WQPP Steering Committee meeting. The WQPP included a project on shallow wells that the City of Marathon supported. The outcome of that study is coming to fruition this evening at the City Council meeting. The City of Marathon will show a resolution on the issue of shallow wells and supporting a settlement to move to deep well injection. The City of Marathon is legally compliant with the wastewater master plan; but they have still supported investigation into shallow wells, and now this move to upgrade that infrastructure. This will be an expensive upgrade.
- Will Benson recognized that funding will be an issue with this settlement. The BTT pharmaceutical studies also show the issue with wastewater inputs. BTT will support efforts to identify grant funding to get this done.

Lisa Mongelia noted that the new History of Diving Museum “Dive Into Art Coral Creations’ exhibit is opening on Wednesday, January 17, 2024. This will include a presentation on the Iconic Reef Guardians program. All are invited.

Will Benson shared that on January 9, 2024, two films will be shown at Tropic Cinema in Key West. This includes a remastered version of the Tarpon Film. A follow-up film made from that original cast called “All that is Sacred” will also be aired.

VI. CLOSING REMARKS

George thanked the council and members of the public for attending. The next meeting will be February 20, 2024. Meeting adjourned at 12:00 pm.

APPENDIX I. AGENCY REPORTS SUBMITTED BY EMAIL

NOAA Office of Law Enforcement:

- NOAA OLE local officers remain busy with routine patrols up and down the Keys.
- Latest OLE Council Report (FY 23 Qtr 4, July-Sept) distributed to Councils/Sanctuaries and contains efforts from the 2023 mini season.
- OLE conducted a targeted operation in early December, concentrating on enforcement efforts in the SPAs. Rough weather persisted and we encountered a small number of recreational and commercial boats in the areas, the majority were in compliance. Redirected efforts to dockside charter enforcement and provided outreach and compliance assistance to the fleet. Vessels encountered didn't display their official documentation properly, lacked sea turtle mitigation gear as well as descender devices.

NOAA Fisheries:

- Protected Resources Updates
 - Regarding our evaluation of over 75,000 comments on the Petition to Establish a Mandatory 10-Knot Speed Limit and Other Vessel-Related Mitigation Measures to Protect Rice's Endangered Whales - We issued a denial of the petition on October 27th. We have concluded that fundamental conservation tasks, including finalizing the critical habitat designation, drafting a species recovery plan, and conducting a quantitative vessel risk assessment, are all needed before we consider vessel regulations.
 - The Southeast Regional Office submitted a memo requesting that NMFS make a determination about the recommendation to add Rice's whale to NMFS's Species in the Spotlight. The Species in the Spotlight Initiative brings together greater attention and resources to save endangered species considered most at risk of extinction.
- Fisheries Updates
 - SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES:
 - Closed golden tilefish commercial hook-and-line component in the South Atlantic on October 31st, 2023
 - Requested proposals for Innovative Strategies to Reduce Red Snapper Discards in the South Atlantic. We received seven proposals which will be evaluated and those selected for funding will hopefully get underway this spring

- Fisheries Updates (cont)
 - Published final rule to revise catch levels for golden tilefish and management measures for golden tilefish and blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic effective 12/7
 - For golden tilefish, the final rule revised the fishing season for the commercial longline component, increased catch levels for the commercial and recreational sectors, updated sector allocations, and new recreational accountability measures. For blueline tilefish, the final rule changes the recreational bag and possession limits, and the accountability measures.
 - Announced reopening of commercial golden tilefish hook and line and longline components in South Atlantic federal waters on 11/17
 - The request for comments to change catch levels, sector allocation, recreational accountability measures, recreational fishing season, and rebuilding plan for Gulf of Mexico Gag closed 12/11
 - Announced reduction of the 2024 commercial greater amberjack catch limits in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico on 11/21
 - Announced that NOAA fisheries will withhold a portion of the 2024 gag individual fishing quota allocation in anticipation of a quota reduction on 11/28
 - Announced final rule to end overfishing of South Atlantic snowy grouper on 12/1
 - The final rule shortens the recreational fishing season from May 1 through August 31 to May 1 through June 30 and revises the acceptable biological catch, annual catch limits, sector allocations, and recreational accountability measures
- South Atlantic Council
 - The Council last met last week in Beaufort NC.
 - The Council received presentations on the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER); the reliability of commercial discard estimates, and offshore wind.
 - The Council reviewed scoping comments on a proposed amendment for Spanish mackerel and advisory panel recommendations on an amendment regarding private recreational fishing permits; gag and black grouper vessel limits and on-demand gear for black sea bass; and scamp and yellowmouth grouper management measures.
 - The next meeting will be March 4 - 8 in Jekyll Island Georgia.
- Gulf Council
 - The Council last met October 23-26 in Panama City, Florida.
 - The Council took final action on the joint amendment with the South Atlantic Council to require commercial electronic reporting; took final action on a framework amendment to modify to recreational and commercial greater

- amberjack management measures; and reviewed draft options for gag and black grouper management measures.
- The Council also requested an emergency rule for greater amberjack to reduce the commercial trip limit to the same level as proposed in the framework amendment to extend the fishing season for 2024.
 - The Council initiated development of an action to review and modify Gulf king mackerel recreational and commercial annual catch limits; an action to adjust the OFL, ABC, and ACL for lane snapper; an action to evaluate equitably distributing catch shares currently held by NMFS and redistributing shares associated with inactive accounts.
 - The next Gulf Council meeting will be January 29 - February 1 in New Orleans, Louisiana.
- **Habitat Conservation:** HCD and PRD continue to work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Broward County on their plans to expand the federal navigation channels within Port Everglades. The current schedule has the dredging beginning in 2028 with necessary precursor work beginning at the U.S. Coast Guard Station in 2025. Mitigation measures to offset impacts to coral and coral reef habitat are still under development and are being closely coordinated with Mission:Iconic Reefs. As part of this effort, the Corps is completing an inventory of the coral nursery industry in Florida, including current and future production capabilities by species, size class, and genetic strain. In addition to being an essential component of the mitigation plan for Port Everglades, this information supports planning efforts underway for Mission: Iconic Reefs. The final report is expected in early 2024.