

Resolution of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council Advancing the Artificial Habitat Working Group Recommendations for Consideration in an Updated Sanctuary Management Plan

Motion passed August 18, 2015 (17 in favor, 0 against)

1. Whereas, The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary harbors a tropical marine ecosystem unique in the continental United States, including the world's third largest barrier coral reef, and
2. Whereas, this State and National environmental treasure experiences intensive usage by local residents and an estimated three million annual visitors to the region including recreational divers, recreational fishers, commercial fishers and boaters and it is subject to water pollution, and climate change impacts originating within and beyond the Sanctuary, and
3. Whereas, visitation and environmental usage are increasing with each passing year, and
4. Whereas, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Condition Report (2011) noted stable to declining trends in water quality related to eutrophication, risk to human health, and the impact of multiple stressors, and fair but increasing trends in human activities that may impact water quality.
5. Whereas, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Condition Report (2011) noted stable or declining trends in the abundance and distribution of habitat types, fair to poor status of the condition of habitats, and fair to poor status of human influence on habitat quality in the Florida Keys, and
6. Whereas, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Condition Report (2011) noted declining trends in the condition of living marine resources in the Sanctuary including fair to poor status of biodiversity, fair status of non-indigenous species, poor status of key species, and fair to poor status of the levels of human activities that might impact the quality of such resources, and
7. Whereas, changing environmental conditions and new activities occurring in the sanctuary that were not anticipated when the original rules were written necessitate an update to FKNMS regulations and permitting procedures, and
8. Whereas, certain resource management issues including climate change, resilience, weather, disease, invasive species, or specific impacts from human activity may require more regulatory flexibility that is not currently possible through the existing framework, and
9. Whereas, the boundaries, zoning, and regulations of the FKNMS are currently under review and it is expected that this review will result in changes that will guide the future of the FKNMS to adapt to and to withstand the environmental impacts associated with increased usage that are inevitable and currently underway, and
10. Whereas, as part of this review, the Sanctuary Advisory Council created a Regulatory and Zoning Alternatives Work-Plan and identified Artificial Habitats as a priority issue to address through this review, and
11. Whereas, the Ecosystem Protection: Ecological Reserves / Preservation Areas and Wildlife Protection Working Group recommended that the Advisory Council establish a sub-committee to review the drawbacks and benefits of the use of artificial reefs and identified a suite of issues that should be considered when evaluating the use of artificial reefs,

12. Whereas, the Sanctuary Advisory Council has discussed and accepted recommendations related to artificial habitats made by the Ecosystem Protection: Ecological Reserves / Preservation Areas and Wildlife Protection Working Group at the August 19, 2014 Council meeting, and
13. Whereas, the Sanctuary Advisory Council passed a motion at the October 21, 2014 Council meeting to create an artificial habitat working group to serve as a liaison between the Sanctuary Advisory Council and the research community; the working group was subsequently charged with the following objectives:
 - Review the history and current status of artificial habitat permitting, placement, use, and monitoring in the Florida Keys.
 - Share area agencies' definitions of artificial habitat/reefs, and clarify how Sanctuary regulations and mandates apply to artificial habitat/reefs.
 - Discuss how the interests of the Sanctuary and of user groups intersect with the issue of artificial habitats, exploring how both potential benefits and impacts connect to those interests.
 - Review a science synthesis completed in 2012, and identify and prioritize remaining research needed to assess the benefits and impacts of artificial habitat use in the Sanctuary.
 - Discuss strategies for addressing research needs using the existing artificial habitats in the Sanctuary.
 - Discuss leveraging partnerships, outside expertise, and other sources of external funding to support artificial habitat research and planning in FKNMS, given the Sanctuary's resource limitations and mandates to protect natural habitats.
 - Brainstorm potential approaches and actions the Sanctuary and user groups can pursue both to clarify the permit process and to improve permit compliance
 - Explore considerations for the future of artificial habitat in the Sanctuary
 - Identify how the Sanctuary, researchers, and user groups can continue to share information on artificial habitats to inform research and management in the Sanctuary and beyond.

Therefore, the Sanctuary Advisory Council of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary resolves as follows:

1. We acknowledge the commitment and contribution of Advisory Council and community members who served on the Artificial Habitat Working Group.
2. We request that the Artificial Habitat Working Group Recommendations are forwarded to the Sanctuary Superintendent for consideration and analysis as part of the management plan review and update process.

Recommendations for Sanctuary Advisory Council Consideration

The following was voted on by working group participants – 19 in favor and 2 abstentions.

The artificial habitat working group of the FKNMS advisory council states that there is the potential for value to the placement of artificial habitat within the FKNMS. Notably there are costs and benefits to the approval and appropriate placement of such structures. The working group recommends the conservative development of an action plan to be placed in the FKNMS management plan. Said action plan should be further developed in concept based on a consideration of all points made during the working group effort July 7-8, 2015, as well as existing body of knowledge, by the members of the working group to be presented to the SAC and to be fully developed by FKNMS staff.

The council is an advisory body to the sanctuary superintendent. The opinions and finding of this publication do not necessarily reflect the position of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, or the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.