



Jean-Jacques Boujot, Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0



Kelsey Stone, New England Aquarium

NOAA OKEANOS Explorer Program, 2013 Northeast U.S. Canyons Expedition

# AMERICA'S DEEP SEA TREASURES: THE NORTHEAST CANYONS AND SEAMOUNTS MARINE NATIONAL MONUMENT

Located about 150 miles off the coast of Cape Cod and approximately the size of Connecticut, the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument is the first and only marine national monument off the continental United States.

The Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument features three underwater canyons deeper than the Grand Canyon, and four seamounts (extinct volcanoes) that rise higher than any mountain east of the Rockies. These dramatic ocean features provide a refuge for an array of marine life, including endangered whales, sea turtles, seabirds, and rare deep-sea corals. The monument was designated in 2016 to safeguard fragile and interconnected ocean ecosystems, improve ocean resilience to warming temperatures and other threats, and help sustain tourism, recreation, fishing, and other sectors of the New England economy that depend on abundant fish and wildlife. The nation's newest ocean park upholds America's proud tradition of preserving the best examples of the country's remarkable natural heritage and biological bounty using the Antiquities Act, a tradition that has been embraced by 15 presidents of both parties. In June 2020, President Trump endangered this special ocean place and vital national tradition when he rolled back protection of the monument and its wildlife from certain commercial extractive activities. We must act now to restore these protections.

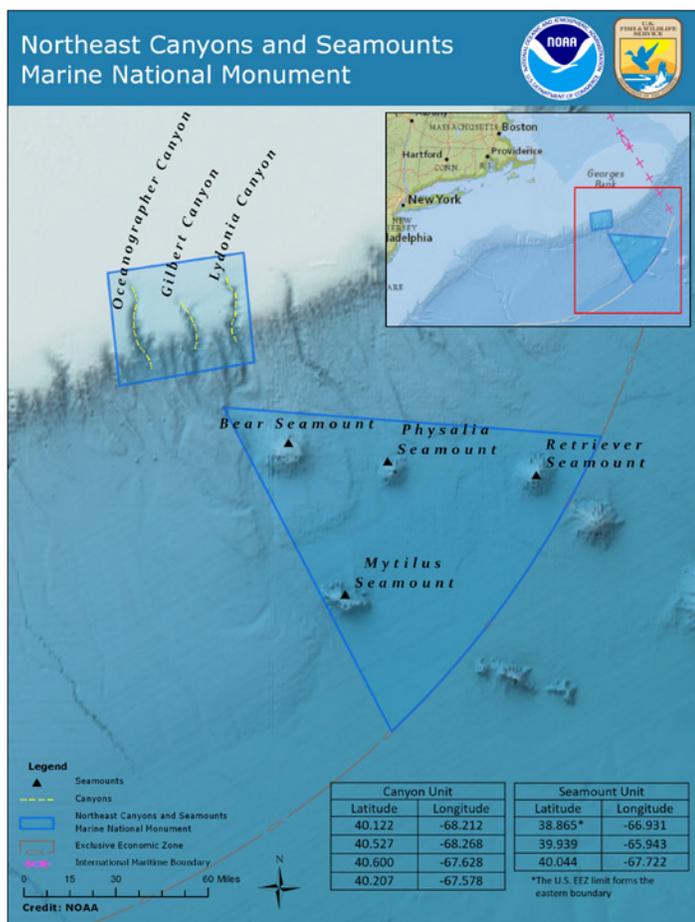
## A BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT

The Canyons and Seamounts Monument encompasses a spectacular underwater seascape inhabited by an extraordinary diversity of life.<sup>1</sup> On the monument's cliffs and crags, colonies of vivid cold-water corals grow—some the size of small trees, centuries old, and as thick as forests. As many as 73 coral species have been identified in the canyons and seamounts, and a 2018 expedition in the monument found two new species.<sup>2</sup> These coral communities form the foundation of deep-sea ecosystems, providing food, spawning habitat, and shelter for fish and invertebrates. The waters above the canyons and seamounts teem with marine life, drawn to upwellings of nutrients and dense schools of small fish and squid. An exceptional diversity and abundance of marine mammals forage in the monument.<sup>3</sup> These include 13 whale species, like the endangered sperm whale as well as beaked whales, which are able to dive nearly two miles deep and hold their breath for more than two hours.<sup>4</sup> Scientists have described the area as a “Serengeti of the sea.” The monument also attracts seabirds like the iconic Atlantic puffin, sea turtles, and, of course, a multitude of fish species, including sharks, tuna, and billfish.



## AN ECOLOGICAL NECESSITY THAT REQUIRES PROTECTION

Many of the monument's deep-sea species have very long recovery times and extremely low resilience. They are vulnerable to disturbance as technological advances enable human activity to venture deeper and deeper into the ocean. The 2016 designation protected the Canyons and Seamounts Monument from all commercial extraction, such as offshore oil and gas activities, seabed mining, and commercial fishing (with the exception of a seven-year phaseout of lobster and red crab fishing). Scientists have called for 30 percent of the planet's ocean area to be set aside from commercial extraction by 2030 to stem biodiversity loss and build resilience against climate change.<sup>5</sup> The extent of such highly protected areas in continental U.S. ocean waters falls far short of this mark. The Canyons and Seamounts Monument encompasses only about 1.5 percent of U.S. waters along the Atlantic coast, but it is still a step in the right direction.



## AMERICA'S NEWEST OCEAN PARK UNDER ATTACK

In June 2020, President Trump issued an order allowing commercial fishing in the monument, which has been challenged in federal court as illegal under the Antiquities Act and other laws. President Trump asserted that the order would help the Maine lobster industry, a claim that the fishermen themselves have disavowed. In fact, government data show that landings and revenues in the relevant fisheries have stayed the same or increased since the 2016 designation.<sup>6</sup> Commercial fishing is not a benign activity in sensitive and unique ecosystems like those that exist in the monument. The industrial-scale extractive operations disturb wildlife and remove their food; large, heavy gear can destroy fragile habitat; and thick lines can entangle and inadvertently snare marine life. Federal fisheries laws are intended principally to ensure "optimum yield." The Antiquities Act's purposes, on the other hand, include protecting biodiversity and special places like the Canyons and Seamounts Monument. It is no coincidence that more than 99 percent of ocean areas in U.S. waters protected from all commercial extractive activities are in marine national monuments.

## UPHOLDING A PROUD TRADITION AND BENEFITING THE ECONOMY

Americans have always strongly supported protecting and conserving public lands and waters. The Canyons and Seamounts Monument's designation was supported by hundreds of thousands of citizens, as well as hundreds of federal, state, and local elected officials, scientists, businesses, faith leaders, aquariums, fishermen and fishing groups, whale watch operators, dive groups, and conservation organizations. As George W. Bush demonstrated when he designated the nation's first marine national monument, the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, special places in the ocean warrant protection just as they do on land. The Canyons and Seamounts Monument is an American treasure and part of a growing system of "blue parks." If full protections were restored, the monument would contribute to the health and productivity of the regional ocean ecosystem— significant increases in marine life have occurred in other areas with these types of protection.<sup>7</sup> Studies have also shown that protected areas have increased catch of species such as lobster in adjacent waters.<sup>8</sup> New England's economy benefits from healthy ocean ecosystems. In 2016, ocean tourism and recreation supported 189,000 jobs and \$9.7 billion in economic activity in New England.<sup>9</sup>

### ENDNOTES

- Peter Auster et al., "A Scientific Basis for Designation of the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument," *Frontiers in Marine Science* 10, no. 566 (July 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2020.00566>.
- K. Pierre-Louise, "Dr. Seuss's Garden' Yields a Deep-Sea Discovery, but It Already Faces Threats," *New York Times*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/climate/coral-atlantic-warming.html>.
- Peter Auster et al., "A Scientific Basis for Designation of the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument," *Frontiers in Marine Science* 10, no. 566 (July 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2020.00566>.
- Ibid.
- E. Dinerstein et al., "A Global Deal for Nature: Guiding Principles, Milestones, and Targets," *Science Advances* 5, no. 4 (April 2019): eaaw2869, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaw2869>.
- NRDC, "The Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument: Impacts on the Commercial Fisheries," updated September 2019, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/commercial-fisheries-impacts-monuments-201909.pdf>.
- Sarah Lester et al., "Biological Effects Within No-Take Marine Reserves: A Global Synthesis," *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 384 (2009): 33-46, <https://doi.org/10.3354/meps08029>.
- Ibid. R. Goñi et al., "Net Contribution of Spillover From a Marine Reserve to Fishery Catches," *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 400 (2010): 233-43, <http://www.int-res.com/abstracts/meps/v400/p233-243/>. F. Vandeperre et al., "Effects of No-Take Area Size and Age of Marine Protected Areas on Fisheries Yields: A Meta-analytical Approach," *Fish and Fisheries* 12, no. 4 (2011): 412-26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-2979.2010.00401.x>.
- National Ocean Economics Program (NOEP), "Ocean Economy Data," 2016, <http://www.oceaneconomics.org/Market/ocean/oceanEcon.asp>.

For more information,  
please contact:

Brad Sewell  
[bsewell@nrdc.org](mailto:bsewell@nrdc.org)

Priscilla Brooks  
[pbrooks@clf.org](mailto:pbrooks@clf.org)

SEPTEMBER 2020  
FS: 20-08-B