



Ocean and Coastal Resources Program

Conserving Resources in Ocean and Great Lakes Parks

Program Links: (Click the links below)

[Ocean Park Stewardship Strategy](#)

[Midwest Region Great Lakes Strategy](#)

[Northeast Region Ocean Park Strategic Plan](#)

[Pacific Ocean Strategic Plan](#)

[Southeast Region Coastal & Ocean Park Strategy](#)

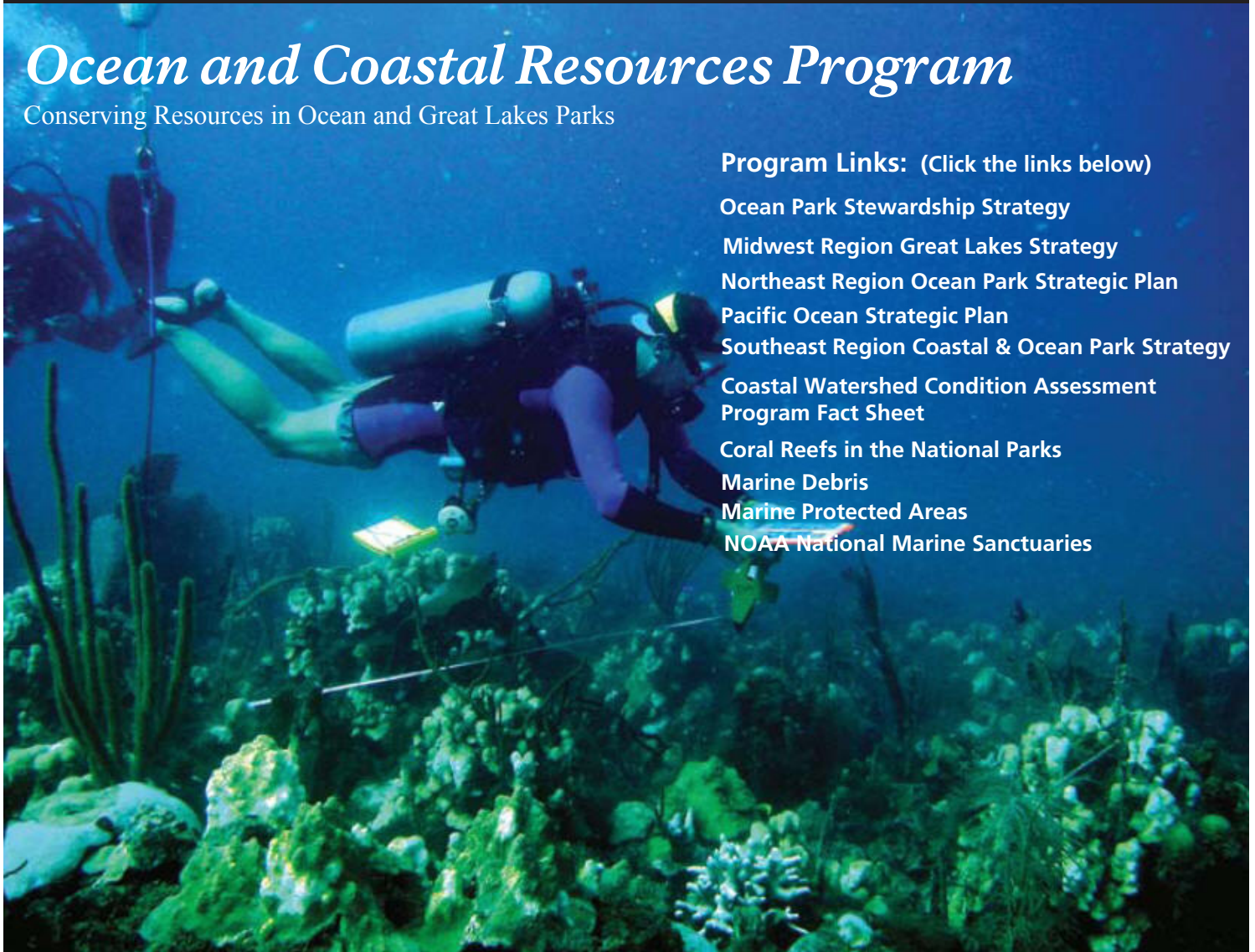
[Coastal Watershed Condition Assessment
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Background

The National Park Service is entrusted with managing 74 ocean and Great Lakes parks across 26 states. Established for their beauty and national significance, these parks conserve over 5,100 miles of coast and 3.1 million acres of ocean and Great Lakes waters, including coral reefs, kelp forests, glaciers, estuaries, beaches, wetlands, historic forts and shipwrecks. The ocean and coastal parks comprise a system of tremendous biological and recreational value to the nation. They attract over 75 million visitors each year and generate over \$2.5 billion in economic benefits to local communities.

Park managers are confronted with multiple threats to natural and cultural resources from inside and outside of park boundaries. Intense population growth and development, overfishing, climate change, pollution and watershed degradation, shoreline impacts from infrastructure and sea-level rise, invasive

species and recreational overuse are taking their toll on park resources. NPS has adopted strategies to increase the agency's organizational and scientific capacity to address ocean and coastal issues in partnership with state and federal agencies and local organizations.

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Channel Island kelp forest and diver.

Highlights and Accomplishments

In 2003, the Natural Resource Program Center (NRPC) began assessing the condition of watersheds in ocean and Great Lakes parks to help managers better understand and conserve their resources. These assessments measure the status of marine, estuarine, and Great Lakes natural resources and identify threats to watershed health. Assessments have been completed in 27 coastal and Great Lakes parks with 20 others underway.

In 2008, the NRPC began a service-wide program to coordinate mapping of submerged habitats in ocean and Great Lakes parks. Geospatial information describing underwater habitats and the distribution and abundance of marine plants and animals is critical to understanding and improving the condition of ocean and coastal parks. The NRPC has partnered with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on pilot benthic mapping projects in five ocean and coastal parks.

The NRPC is leading efforts with USGS to address critical science and management needs related to storm hazards and coastal vulnerability, storm recovery and mitigation of coastal infrastructure impacts on shoreline processes and park resources. USGS and NPS are conducting storm hazard assessments and developing an inventory of engineering structures that have altered coastal processes. The NRPC is creating a prototype post-storm recovery plan at Cape Lookout National Seashore to help parks protect resources while addressing damaged infrastructure, visitation, debris removal, road clearing or rebuilding, and educating park visitors about storm dynamics. Resource Advisors have also been trained to join post-storm Incident Management Teams.

“No-take” marine reserves have been established in Dry Tortugas National Park and two Virgin Islands national parks to protect fragile coral reef ecosystems and restore depleted fishery resources. NRPC collaborated with USGS and other partners to dedicate over \$2 million in federal and state research funds to evaluate these ecosystems and measure the benefits of the new reserves.

The NRPC is restoring salt marsh habitats in five parks and is assisting 11 parks with preventing recreational impacts to sensitive aquatic habitats and wildlife via educational partnerships, outreach to boaters and the recreational community, and the use of mooring buoys, navigational aids, signs and maps.

Status and Future

The National Park System contains substantial ocean and coastal resources. However, these resources are declining and rapidly approaching critical levels beyond which recovery may not be possible. As species are extirpated and ecosystems lose resilience and degrade into simplified states, opportunities for restoration fade. Ocean and Great Lakes parks face unprecedented challenges. To meet these challenges, park managers need better information about the condition of submerged natural and cultural resources; models that predict the impacts of sea level, temperature, and other changes on coastal ecosystems; and innovative mitigation and restoration techniques. Critical to improved ocean conservation in the National Park System are partnerships with other ocean and coastal agencies, especially those that manage contiguous areas, and local communities to facilitate communication, cooperation and collaboration. Parks have a unique opportunity to provide education and outreach to the public on the consequences of threats including climate change. Doing a better job of connecting people to ocean parks may be the most important task ahead.