

Undersea Gulf sanctuary grows three times bigger

By Emily Foxhall STAFF WRITER

Courtesy Jesse Cancelmo



Karol Breuer, left, and Justin Blake help maintain a boat that works in the Flower Garden Banks National Sanctuary in Galveston. The underwater national park protects coral and creatures that live in the banks.

Godofredo A. Vásquez / Staff photographer

A sanctuary protecting coral and other creatures in the Gulf of Mexico officially became three times larger Monday, after years of work by scientists and volunteers to see it expand.

Researchers at the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary had hoped for the new boundaries to be even larger, but they still cheered the change as an important step in protecting Gulf habitats.

“It’s been a long time coming,” Superintendent G.P. Schmahl said when the proposal was published. “From my perspective, the fact that we were able to establish it is really, really significant — really important.”

Congress established the sanctuary in 1992 to protect the East and West Flower Garden Banks, areas well-

known by scientists, fishermen and divers for hulking coral and animals that lived around them. The banks sit about 100 miles from the Texas Gulf Coast.

Congress added a third bank to the sanctuary in 1996. In all three, federal protections limited oil and gas activity and fishing. Sanctuary staff were charged with overseeing the areas, which Schmahl likens to an underwater national park.

Researchers have been exploring in and beyond the sanctuary since, using new technology and maps to discover and document what lives there. They put forth a proposal to expand the sanctuary boundaries to make it nearly seven times as large.

Some felt their suggestion was too big. A committee representing interests such as commercial and recreational fishing, oil and gas and diving whittled it down to new boundaries that are nearly identical to what was already in place to manage oil and gas companies.

That result disappointed part of the group and those following it. Others emphasized how much negotiation and volunteer time went into it. Fishermen were giving up potential revenue but agreed with the mission of protecting these places. They were proud of what they achieved.

Everyone had to make compromises, said fisherman Shane Cantrell, who co-chaired the group that developed the boundaries, in an earlier interview about the proposal.

“You can always do more; that’s common in the conservation world,” he said. “I think this is a phenomenal step, tripling the size of the sanctuary. But its not the end. This isn’t the end of coral protections, or end of growing the sanctuary. This is a critical step in the process of future protections.” emsily.foxhall@chron.com



Coral grows in the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, where Jesse Cancelmo has been diving for decades.