

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON A PROPOSAL TO DESIGNATE CALIFORNIA'S SEAMOUNTS, RIDGES, AND BANKS A NATIONAL MONUMENT

After discussion and deliberation, the Highly Migratory Species Advisory Subpanel (HMSAS) would like to offer the following comments on the Draft document entitled “The Case for Protecting California’s Seamounts, Ridges and Banks” (attached). We acknowledge this is an unattributed document which is clearly labeled DRAFT. However, members of the HMSAS were sent this by members of the California Legislature and its existence has been verified by staffers with Senator Barbara Boxer and Congressman Jared Huffman. As we understand it, the protection being sought will take the form of a National Marine Monument designation under the Antiquities Act.

The HMSAS is concerned about this proposal for a number of reasons.

- Using the Antiquities Act subverts the public process. Unlike the highly public process associated with the National Marine Sanctuary program, the Antiquities Act requires nothing more than the President’s signature. To date, no fishery or fishery management interests were contacted or involved in the development of this draft proposal.
- The proposal targets commercial fishing activities, which will have a deleterious impact on California’s and the nation’s economies. According to numerous reports, the United States imports roughly 90 percent of the seafood consumed here. This proposal will further exacerbate this reliance on foreign products.
- The seamounts, ridges, and banks identified within the Draft document will have a dramatic effect on many, if not all, of California’s fisheries. Using the California spiny lobster fishery as an example – the recently completed Marine Protected Area process resulted in the loss of roughly 14 – 16 percent of their historic fishing habitat. As a result, a number of participants in that fishery are expanding their operations to cover areas contained in this proposal. Any restrictions in these areas would be detrimental to all types of fishermen.

A coalition of commercial and recreational fishing interests is working together with concerned nongovernmental organizations to oppose this proposal. In conversations with staffers from Senator Boxer’s and Representative Huffman’s offices, it was recommended we compile data which shows the importance (economically, historically, and socially) of these areas to California’s fisheries. We are working with the Department of Fish and Wildlife and National Marine Fisheries Service to get this information together.

At the recently-completed Council Coordination Committee meeting, it was resolved that “if any designations are made in the marine environment under authorities such as the Antiquities Act of 1906 that fisheries management in the US EEZ waters continue to be developed, analyzed and implemented through the public process of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.”

1. We request the Council to prepare and submit a Statement in opposition to the action proposed here.
2. We request the Council to prepare and submit a Statement where it highlights the Resolution of the Council Coordination Committee in its opposition to the action proposed here.

Attachment – The Case for Protecting California’s Seamounts, Ridges and Banks – DRAFT

PPMC

06/22/16

no extractive activities
but reef fish OK

The Case for Protecting California's Seamounts, Ridges and Banks



Deep-sea coral and sponge community on Rodriguez Seamount (courtesy of MBARI)

Summary

The deep sea off California's coastline is home to an exceptional array of seamounts, ridges and banks that host diverse marine wildlife and habitat, as well as extraordinary geological features. These areas serve as oceanic oases, providing nutrient-rich waters, unusually high productivity and relatively large concentrations of a variety of species. Endangered fin and blue whales, unique angler fish and sea jellies, and rare deep-water corals and sponges are just some of the species that rely upon these valuable habitats.

Taken together, the biological and geological treasures found within California's seamounts, ridges, and banks exhibit significant scientific importance and warrant additional protection. The biological and geological hotspots under consideration include: **Gorda Ridge** (the portion off California) and **Mendocino Ridge** in the north; **Gumdrop**, **Pioneer**, **Guide**, and **Taney Seamounts** off Central California; and **Rodriguez** and **San Juan Seamounts**, and **Northeast**, **Cortes** and **Tanner Banks** in the south. All are in federal waters.

Overview of California's Seamounts, Ridges and Banks

Generally, the open ocean has lower productivity than areas closer to shore and is often absent of large marine animals. But the waters overlying California's seamounts, ridges and banks are the exception to this rule. These special places are home to thousand-year-old corals thriving against all odds in the dark, cold depths. And they attract a remarkable variety of migratory predators, such as sharks, tuna, billfishes, seabirds, and endangered sea turtles, which congregate to fuel up on the food produced by nutrient-rich upwelling currents.

Seamounts

Much of the world's ocean basins are flat, muddy, abyssal plains, but seamounts are Rocky Mountains that tower above the plains, often occurring in chains or clusters. Although scientists have explored only a fraction of seamounts globally, research on California seamounts has found many species that are found nowhere else. Still, much remains to be learned about these seep-sea treasures in our own backyard.

Rodriguez Seamount, located west of the Channel Islands, is an ancient island between seven and eleven million years old that once stood 230 feet above sea level. It now sits 2,000 feet below the ocean's surface and provides habitat to a wide variety of deep-sea corals, brittle stars and anemones. Corals, sponges, and anemones are especially important in areas like these because they have long life spans and form extensive, complex and fragile three-dimensional structures that provide habitats for many other marine species.

Other seamounts are underwater volcanos that never emerged from the surface. Guide Seamount is 53 miles offshore, just west of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Its tallest cone is nearly one mile below sea level, yet this area hosts a variety of seabirds, most likely from colonies at the nearby Farallon Islands.

Ridges

Oceanic ridges are underwater mountain ranges, created by uplifting of the ocean floor. Mendocino Ridge is the crest of a 1,864-mile long fault that extends from the San Andreas Fault at Cape Mendocino westward into the Pacific Ocean. Though its shallowest portions are 3,600 feet below sea level, this ridge hosts some of the highest fish and octopus densities ever reported in the deep sea.

Gorda Ridge straddles northern California and southern Oregon and hosts the only hydrothermal vent systems within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Hydrothermal vents support unique ecosystems of chemosynthetic life in the deep sea, harboring dense communities of animals well-adapted to the distinctly harsh local environment. These fragile, slow-growing organisms are particularly vulnerable to human-caused impacts and are likely to face long recovery times if damaged.

Banks

Cortes and Tanner Banks are underwater mountains 110 miles west of San Diego that host over 137 unique fish species and endangered white abalone, sea turtles and fin whales and 34 structure-forming species of algae. While remote, recreational and spear fishermen consider the area one of the more exciting opportunities for bluefin tuna and yellowtail. SCUBA divers visit for the vast kelp forests, wreck diving opportunities and unmatched clarity. The banks at Cortes and Tanner rise to within 12 feet of the of the ocean's surface, creating one of the largest waves on the planet and drawing the world's most accomplished surfers.

Threats to California's Seamounts, Ridges and Banks

Although these special places are offshore and relatively far from coastal populations, these seamounts, ridges and banks are not exempt from human impacts. Fisheries have widespread bycatch impacts on local marine wildlife that depend upon these productive areas. Direct and indirect drilling and mining impacts could harm these sensitive ecosystems if pursued in the future.

Left intact, protected seamounts, ridges and banks can serve as refuges and centers of resilience for a unique array of species and habitats in the face of activities that alter the sea bed, as well as climate change and ocean acidification.

Fishing

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) has recognized the importance of these areas for local fish populations by designating many of these sites as "Essential Fish Habitat," in which the take of groundfish by bottom trawling is prohibited. Unfortunately, these protections are not permanent.

The commercial fishery for all five species of abalone closed at the end of the 20th century and the intense declines made way for a complete moratorium on take south of San Francisco in 1997. In 2001, the white abalone became the first marine invertebrate to be listed under the Endangered Species Act. Today, the last stronghold for wild white abalone is at Tanner and Cortes Banks.

Many of the commercial fisheries that currently operate over these seamounts, ridges and banks include: the commercial drift gillnet fishery for swordfish and thresher shark; purse seine fisheries for tropical tuna; the North Pacific commercial albacore hook and line fishery. There is also a set gillnet fishery that targets California halibut, angel sharks and white seabass. The set gillnet and drift gillnet fisheries in California are the second and fourth worst bycatch fisheries in the nation, with staggering rates of 65% and 63%, respectively. These fisheries occur at some of the seamounts, ridges and banks proposed here. Set gillnets were banned in nearshore waters off southern California in 1994, but are still permitted in

federal waters today. In just a three-year period, more than 30,000 sharks and rays were discarded as waste by the set gillnet fishery.

The mile-long nets used in the drift gillnet fishery for swordfish and thresher sharks inevitably entangle a wide array of sea creatures, including endangered sea turtles and marine mammals. In 2010 an estimated 49 dolphins and 16 sperm whales were killed by this fishery. Another study found that the drift gillnet fishery was responsible for the entanglement or death of almost 550 marine mammals in five years.

The species targeted by these fisheries, as well as the sharks, rays, sea turtles and mammals discarded by these fisheries, rely on healthy and productive seamounts, ridges and banks in California waters. By protecting this network of special places, California can support sustainable migratory populations into the future.

Oil, Gas and Mining

Although the California Coastal Sanctuary Act prohibits new oil and gas leases in state waters, the moratorium in federal waters off California expires at the end of 2017. Offshore oil and gas could be a significant future threat if the price of oil increases and future Administrations are favorable to oil and gas exploration and development.

The deep sea is believed to hold large quantities of untouched energy resources, precious metals and minerals. The presence of massive high-grade seafloor sulfide deposits on Gorda Ridge are a tempting target for deep-sea mining interests.

New oil exploration or mining at or adjacent to these seamounts, ridges and banks could destroy their unique, fragile ecosystems. The designation of a national monument is the best way to eliminate permanently this serious threat.

Conservation Opportunity and Recommendation

We have an opportunity to establish a first-of-its-kind ecological network of globally important deep-sea sites. With less than 1% of federal waters along the continental United States protected, this would be an historic act.

These protections would extend those offered by California's landmark coastal network of marine protected areas, connecting to very different bioregions and leaving a powerful legacy of ocean protection.

A monument designation could provide protection for all identified seamounts, ridges and banks by limiting harmful fishing and prohibiting drilling, mining and other industrial activities that could harm fragile life within the monument's boundaries. Recreational activities would continue throughout the network.

Map