

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON MONTEREY BAY NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARY CORAL RESEARCH AND RESTORATION CLOSURES – FISHERY
MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT FINAL ACTION

The Habitat Committee (HC) received a briefing from Dr. Lisa Woonick and Karen Grimmer with the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary (MBNMS) on the Council action to identify a Final Preferred Alternative. This would create Groundfish Exclusion Areas for commercial bottom contact fishing within the MBNMS to allow for research on coral habitat and restoration.

The HC recommends including all three areas identified in Alternatives 1 and 2 as the Final Preferred Alternative (i.e., Ascension Canyon, Año Nuevo Canyon, and Sur Ridge). The three areas provide the spatial flexibility required to meet the MBNMS objectives, which includes research on deep-sea coral (DSC) propagation and restoration, and investigating the role of deep-sea coral as habitat for fish. The HC believes there are multiple benefits from the intended research and restoration efforts, including:

- Restoration and enhancement of DSC communities at these locations may, over time, increase the amount of biogenic habitat available to and utilized by fish, and further our understanding of habitat requirements for groundfish.
- With the development of offshore wind energy areas and other emerging ocean uses, DSC will face new threats. The timing is right for the MBNMS research efforts, as this research will help advance DSC restoration techniques. This could lead to the development of mitigation strategies and requirements; similar in concept to mitigation requirements developed for eelgrass habitat in estuaries.

To evaluate whether restoration efforts are successful, it will be important to differentiate between natural and propagated corals over the 10 year study period and to define measures of success. The HC is encouraged to hear that NMS is interested in collaborating with the National Marine Fisheries Service Habitat Conservation Program to develop a strategy for studying fish utilization at the research areas. The HC looks forward to hearing updates by the MBNMS in the NMS annual report to the Council.