

Marine Mammal Commission

Fiscal Years 2022-2026 Strategic Plan

September 2021

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Background	1
Organizational Structure	1
Commission Vision	2
Mission	2
Definition of Terms	2
Commission Fundamentals	3
Priority Topics and Strategic Goals	4
Provide Policy and Legal Oversight	5
Improve Population Assessment and Health Surveillance	6
Assess and Address Anthropogenic Threats Facing Marine Mammals	7
Improve Marine Mammal and Ecosystem Research	8
Engage with Marine Mammal Protection Act Stakeholders	9

Marine Mammal Commission

Strategic Plan

Fiscal Years 2022-2026

Background

The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972 was enacted to protect and manage marine mammals, with the primary objective of maintaining the health and stability of marine ecosystems. Title II of the MMPA created the Marine Mammal Commission (the Commission) as an independent federal agency to promote conservation of marine mammal species and stocks and further the Act's policies through oversight of the activities of other federal agencies related to marine mammals and their habitat. In this role, the Commission provides recommendations to those agencies on actions needed to meet the intent and provisions of the Act.

The Commission's oversight and advisory role helps ensure that domestic and international policies and actions of federal agencies are consistent with the MMPA and other legislation related to maintaining a healthy marine environment. The risk factors that can adversely impact marine mammals include fishing, climate change, anthropogenic sound, harmful algal blooms (HABs) and other habitat alterations, disease, contaminants, marine debris, vessel strikes and vessel disturbance. Additionally, as some marine mammal populations have recovered to near historical levels, conflicts with human activities have increased in number and kind. Many marine mammals feed at high trophic levels, are long-lived, and, in some cases, are susceptible to health risks similar to those that affect humans, making them sentinel species for the ocean and human health. Knowledge of marine mammal abundance, distribution, and health can provide indications of adverse changes to the marine environment that are consequential for human communities, notably those of Alaska Natives who depend on marine mammals for subsistence.

To meet its oversight responsibilities under the MMPA, the Commission relies on a small full-time staff, consults with its Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals (CSA), and engages with other federal agencies, particularly the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), Department of State, and Navy; state agencies (e.g., Departments of Fish and Game and Environmental Conservation); and affected Native American Tribes and Organizations.

The Commission has adopted and fully supports a policy against discrimination of any employee or applicant for employment because of age, race, religion, color, disability, sex (including pregnancy, sexual orientation, and gender identity), genetic information, and national origin.

Organizational Structure

The Commission consists of three Commissioners knowledgeable in the fields of marine ecology and resource management, appointed by the President and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, with one Commissioner designated by the President as Chairman. The nine-member CSA, composed of scientists knowledgeable in marine ecology and marine mammal affairs, is appointed by the Chairman of the Commission in consultation with the other Commissioners and the Director of the National Science Foundation, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, the Chairman of the Council on Environmental

Quality, and the Chairman of the National Academy of Sciences. The Commission has a full-time staff of 14 employees, including the Executive Director, who is appointed by the Chairman with the approval of the other Commissioners.

Commission Vision

Global marine mammal populations are restored and maintained as significant functioning elements of healthy marine ecosystems for future generations, with human activities managed to minimize impacts on those populations and systems.

Mission

The Commission provides independent, science-based oversight of domestic and international policies and actions, thereby promoting effective implementation of the MMPA and its goals of protecting and conserving marine mammals and their habitat.

Definition of Terms

Commission Fundamentals: Commission fundamentals characterize the duties and responsibilities of the Marine Mammal Commission, as identified by the U.S. Congress in enacting the MMPA.

Priority Topics: Priority topics are ongoing, new, and emerging issues facing marine mammal species and stocks over the next four years.

Strategic Goals: Strategic goals provide the broader framework for carrying out the functions and processes of the agency essential to meeting its mission¹.

Objectives: Objectives are the major measurable steps the agency undertakes to achieve its strategic goals².

¹ Per the Office of Management of Budget (OMB), “Strategic goals articulate clear statements of what the agency wants to achieve to advance its mission and address relevant national problems, needs, challenges and opportunities.”

² Similarly, OMB guidance advises that “Objectives reflect the outcome or management impact the agency is trying to achieve and generally include the agency’s role. The set of all agency strategic objectives together should be comprehensive of all agency activity.”

Commission Fundamentals

Title II of the MMPA specifies the duties of the Commission and its Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals. The Commission's Strategic Goals and Objectives are based on the seven duties set forth in section 202(a) of the MMPA, which can be found on our website³. These seven duties can be distilled into five fundamental areas of responsibility:

- I. Prevent the depletion or extinction and promote the recovery of marine mammal species and stocks to optimum sustainable populations, especially those that are threatened or endangered.
- II. Address short-, medium-, and long-term threats to marine mammals and their ecosystems.
- III. Formulate and convey independent science-based advice to ensure that human activities are carried out in accordance with the requirements of the MMPA.
- IV. Promote international conservation by fostering bilateral and multilateral efforts to identify and reduce threats facing marine mammals within and beyond U.S. waters.
- V. Take and recommend actions to conserve marine mammals and their habitats and to further other policies of the MMPA, including those that protect the livelihoods of Alaska Natives who depend on marine mammals.

³ https://www.mmc.gov/wp-content/uploads/MMPA_Aug2017.pdf#page=84

Priority Topics

The Marine Mammal Commission has identified the following Priority Topics as important issues related to marine mammal conservation meriting attention over the next four years.

- Impacts of Fisheries
- Climate Change
- Anthropogenic Sound
- Alaska Native Subsistence
- Habitat Degradation and Marine Debris
- Disease and Contaminants
- Vessel Strikes and Disturbance
- Conflicts between Human Activities and Recovering Marine Mammal Populations

Strategic Goals

The Marine Mammal Commission's Strategic Goals are designed to realize the Commission's Mission and address the Priority Topics for marine mammal conservation over the four-year life of this Strategic Plan.

1. **Provide Policy and Legal Oversight:** Our goal is to ensure the faithful implementation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act's mandates by providing oversight of actions and policies.
2. **Improve Population Assessment and Health Surveillance:** Our goal is to improve the availability and quality of data, scientific assessments, and information necessary for marine mammal conservation and management programs, especially in the face of climate change.
3. **Assess and Address Anthropogenic Threats Facing Marine Mammals:** Our goal is to assess and address the impacts of human activities on marine mammals and their ecosystems and to determine ways to eliminate or reduce those impacts.
4. **Improve Marine Mammal and Ecosystem Research:** Our goal is to support research on priority topics in marine mammal and ecosystem science, assess proposed studies directed at understanding and reducing impacts on marine mammals and their ecosystems, and track and encourage multi-agency research and management to avoid unwarranted duplication of effort.
5. **Engage with Marine Mammal Protection Act Stakeholders:** Our goal is to engage with Congress, federal and state agencies, scientists, Alaska Native communities, non-governmental and international organizations, industry, and the public and serve as an independent, science-based resource for identifying, understanding, and assisting others to address the Commission's Priority Topics.

Strategic Goals and Objectives

Goal #1 – Provide Policy and Legal Oversight: Our goal is to ensure the faithful implementation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act’s mandates by providing oversight of actions and policies.

Background: As an independent U.S. government agency with oversight responsibilities, the Commission provides timely, science-based reviews of proposed actions by federal agencies and other entities and recommends measures to further the purposes and policies of the MMPA and the faithful implementation of the Act’s mandates. We seek to promote practical, cost-effective ways to advance science-based conservation and resolve management issues pertaining to marine mammals.

Objectives to Accomplish Goal #1:

- 1.1** Review and provide recommendations on proposed incidental take authorizations with regard to the requirements of the MMPA in order to ensure that the statutory criteria are met and the best available science has informed such authorizations.
- 1.2** Participate in interagency reviews of Administration positions and Congressional communications related to implementing the MMPA and proposed amendments thereto.
- 1.3** Review and provide recommendations on proposed scientific research, public display, enhancement, photography, and other permit applications as required by the MMPA.
- 1.4** Recommend, review, and comment on proposed listings, listing changes, critical habitat designations, and recovery plans under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and depletion determinations under the MMPA.
- 1.5** Facilitate the development and execution of cooperative agreements between Alaska Native organizations and federal partners to co-manage marine mammal species and stocks used for subsistence and handicraft purposes.
- 1.6** Track and assess U.S. actions to implement international agreements relevant to marine mammals including the International Whaling Commission and the Convention on the Conservation of Polar Bears.
- 1.7** Review and provide recommendations on other U.S. statutes or obligations, including international agreements, related to marine mammals.

Goal #2 - Improve Population Assessment and Health Surveillance: Our goal is to improve the availability and quality of data, scientific assessments, and information necessary for marine mammal conservation and management programs, especially in the face of climate change.

Background: Marine mammals are indicators of the health and stability of marine ecosystems. The conservation status of marine mammal populations and the health of individuals are influenced by a variety of environmental and anthropogenic factors. The MMPA directs the Commission to review the conservation status of marine mammal species and stocks, which requires close working relationships with other agencies. The Commission maintains such relationships with federal agencies and other stakeholders and regularly engages with them to further this goal.

Objectives to Accomplish Goal #2:

2.1 Maintain a working knowledge of the latest research and research methods on marine mammal stocks and management needs through participation in meetings of regional Scientific Review Groups and other means of information exchange related to marine mammal science and management.

2.2 Review and provide recommendations on draft stock assessment reports.

2.3 Participate in, or lead, interagency efforts to develop or garner support for marine mammal assessments, novel research methods, and data aggregation, mapping, analysis, and access tools.

2.4 Collaborate with agency partners on the development of a Marine Mammal Health Monitoring and Analysis Platform.

2.5 Serve on the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events to investigate the extent and causes of such events.

2.6 Engage with Alaska Native communities to facilitate integration of indigenous knowledge and traditional science into population assessments and health surveillance efforts.

2.7 Track and provide advice on restoration and monitoring efforts in response to the Natural Resource Damage Assessment from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and other environmental disasters.

Goal #3 – Assess and Address Anthropogenic Threats Facing Marine Mammals: Our goal is to assess and address the impacts of human activities on marine mammals and their ecosystems and to determine ways to eliminate or reduce those impacts.

Background: To restore and maintain marine mammal populations as functioning elements of healthy marine ecosystems, the Commission works to identify and forecast anthropogenic impacts on marine mammals and their ecosystems. Appropriate mitigation measures are identified and evaluated by applying the principles and requirements of the MMPA and the best available science. These are communicated by the Commission in recommendations to action proponents.

Objectives to Accomplish Goal #3:

- 3.1** Work with agencies and stakeholders to minimize the direct impacts of fishing (mortality and serious injury due to bycatch) and the indirect impacts (depletion of prey base) on marine mammals.
- 3.2** Identify measures to mitigate impacts on marine mammals from anthropogenic sources of sound.
- 3.3** Identify measures to mitigate impacts on marine mammals from vessel strikes and disturbance.
- 3.4** Work with agencies and stakeholders to reduce mortality and serious injury of and sub-lethal impacts on marine mammals taken incidental to other human activities.
- 3.5** Identify measures to prevent and mitigate the impacts of oil spills.
- 3.6** Encourage collection of baseline and monitoring data for use in assessing and mitigating anthropogenic impacts on marine mammals.
- 3.7** Participate in and support efforts to understand, mitigate, and manage anthropogenic impacts on marine mammal populations, including cumulative impacts from multiple sources.

Goal #4 – Improve Marine Mammal and Ecosystem Research: Our goal is to support research on priority topics in marine mammal and ecosystem science, assess proposed studies directed at understanding and reducing impacts on marine mammals and their ecosystems, especially in the face of climate change, and track and encourage multi-agency research.

Background: The Commission’s marine mammal and ecosystem research efforts include funding basic and applied research, convening and participating in workshops, conducting literature reviews, providing expert opinion, and drafting manuscripts and reports. The Commission identifies gaps in research effort or funding, documents areas of strength in Federal research investment, and recommends agency actions and budget priorities.

Objectives to Accomplish Goal #4:

- 4.1** Fund research through a small grants program and other appropriate mechanisms.
- 4.2** Provide information on federal funding of research related to marine mammal programs to Congress and other stakeholders by agency, species, objective, and location through the Survey of Federally Funded Marine Mammal Research.
- 4.3** Track new and emerging research technologies.
- 4.4** Serve on and support the work of interagency committees and working groups directed at increasing the consideration of marine mammals in biodiversity studies and ecosystem management.
- 4.5** Identify and pursue opportunities to build research capacity related to marine mammal conservation and threat mitigation in other countries.
- 4.6** Review federal agency research programs and identify gaps to improve monitoring and protection of marine mammals and their ecosystems.
- 4.7** Review, evaluate, and disseminate new research findings on marine mammal species and stocks and their habitat.

Goal #5 – Engage with Marine Mammal Protection Act Stakeholders: Our goal is to engage with Congress, federal and state agencies, scientists, Alaska Native communities, tribal governments, non-governmental and international organizations, industry, and the public and serve as an independent, science-based resource for identifying, understanding, and assisting others to address the Commission’s Priority Topics.

Background: The Commission seeks to facilitate cooperation and communication among a wide range of stakeholders involved in marine mammal science, conservation, management, and ocean-resource use. Through its recommendations, reports, workshops, and other activities, the Commission encourages federal agencies and other MMPA stakeholders to address marine mammal conservation, science, and policy issues. Through its engagement with Alaska Native organizations, tribal governments, and other underserved constituencies, the Commission seeks to advance equity matters.

Objectives to Accomplish Goal #5:

- 5.1** Work closely with marine mammal management agencies (e.g., NMFS and FWS) to achieve the mandates of the MMPA.
- 5.2** Provide background information, science and policy advice, and drafting services to Congressional offices and Committees on issues pertaining to marine mammal research, management, and conservation.
- 5.3** Enhance cooperation among and promote co-management of marine mammals by federal agencies and Alaska Native organizations.
- 5.4** Implement the Marine Mammal Commission’s action plan for consultation and coordination with tribal governments.
- 5.5** Promote recruitment of and provide opportunities to students and marine mammal scientists from under-represented communities, through outreach, mentoring, hosting or sponsoring detailees, fellows, and interns, etc.
- 5.6** Organize and support events, meetings (including Commission Annual Meetings), and workshops to disseminate information and discuss issues related to the conservation of marine mammals and their ecosystems.
- 5.7** Maintain a website and other services for the public (newsletters, reports, and social media) providing information on priority marine mammal issues and access to all Commission recommendation letters and other key documents.