

Marine Mammal Commission

Fiscal Years 2027-2030 Strategic Plan

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Marine Mammal Commission

Strategic Plan

Fiscal Years 2027-2030

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. Factors that can adversely impact marine mammals include commercial fishing, anthropogenic sound, harmful algal blooms (HABs), habitat alteration, disease, contaminants, marine debris, vessel strikes, and disturbance. Additionally, as some marine mammal populations have recovered to near historical levels, conflicts with human activities have increased in some areas. Many marine mammals feed at high trophic levels, are long-lived, and, in some cases, are susceptible to health risks like those that affect humans, making them sentinel species for the ocean and human health. In addition, knowledge of marine mammal abundance, distribution, and health can provide indications of 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, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of State, and the Navy; various state agencies; and Tribal Nations 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, 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 Chair. The nine-member CSA, composed of scientists knowledgeable in marine ecology and marine mammal affairs, is appointed by the Chair of the Commission in consultation with the other Commissioners and the Director of the National Science Foundation, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, the Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality, and the Chair of the National Academy of Sciences. The Commission has a full-time staff of 12 employees, including the Executive Director, who is appointed by the Chair with the approval of the other Commissioners.

Vision

That marine mammal populations are maintained as, or restored to, functioning elements of their ecosystems for future generations.

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 habitats.

Definition of Terms

Commission Fundamentals: Commission fundamentals characterize the duties and responsibilities of the Marine Mammal Commission, as set forth in the MMPA.

Priority Topics: Priority topics are ongoing or emerging issues facing marine mammals 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.

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."

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 the Commission's website². These duties are represented in the Commission's 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.

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.

- Fishery Interactions
- Environmental Variability
- Anthropogenic Sound
- Alaska Native Subsistence Harvest
- Vessel Strikes and Disturbance
- Habitat Degradation and Marine Debris
- Disease and Contaminants
- Conflicts between Human Activities and Marine Mammal Populations

² https://www.mmc.gov/wp-content/uploads/MMPA_2023.pdf#page=97

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 Regarding MMPA Implementation:

Our goal is to ensure the faithful implementation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act's mandates by providing oversight of actions and policies.

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. It also recommends measures to further the purposes and policies of the MMPA and the faithful implementation of the Act's mandates. The Commission seeks to promote practical, cost-effective ways to advance science-based conservation and resolve management issues pertaining to marine mammals.

2. Improve Marine Mammal Population Assessment and Health Surveillance:

Our goal is to improve the availability and quality of data, scientific assessments, and other information necessary for marine mammal conservation and management programs.

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.

3. Assess and Address Threats to Marine Mammals:

Our goal is to assess and address threats to marine mammals and their ecosystems and to determine ways to eliminate or reduce impacts of those threats.

To restore and maintain marine mammal populations as functioning elements of healthy marine ecosystems, the Commission works to identify and forecast stressors that impact 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 then communicated by the Commission in recommendations to action proponents.

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.

The Commission's marine mammal and ecosystem research efforts include funding basic and applied research, conducting or collaborating on research essential to the agency's mission, 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.

5. Engage with Marine Mammal Protection Act Partners:

Our goal is to engage with Congress, federal and state agencies, scientists, Alaska Native Organizations, Tribes, 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.

The Commission seeks to facilitate cooperation and communication among a wide range of partners 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 partners to address marine mammal conservation, science, and policy issues.