

# This Day in History... October 23, 1972

## National Marine Sanctuaries

On October 23, 1972, President Richard Nixon signed legislation establishing the National Marine Sanctuary Program. This program protects and manages over 783,000 square miles of aquatic areas in and around the US.

Protecting aquatic areas wasn't a new idea. As early as 1641, the Massachusetts Bay Colony issued a legal code protecting ponds, bays, coves, and rivers. Over time, the US established state and national parks, refuges, and monuments, some of which included some of the waterways around land to be protected. Two of the earliest marine life refuges founded without land-based areas in the US were in San Diego and Monterey Bay. By the 1960s, similar reserves were established in Florida and Hawaii.

In 1966, Japan hosted a Special Symposium on Marine Parks and that same year, President Lyndon Johnson's Science Advisory Committee called for a report on "Effective Use of the Sea." Within two years, the first of 11 bills calling for the creation of marine sanctuaries were introduced to Congress. These and similar bills that called for increased protections as shoreline development expanded were fiercely opposed by those with business interest, including the oil and gas industries.

*These sanctuaries protect all kinds of sea creatures.*

Then on January 28, 1969, three million gallons of oil spilled into the Santa Barbara Channel, killing thousands of birds, fish, and other marine creatures. The spill caused public outrage and gave politicians the push they needed to make a change. By 1972, the Second World Parks Congress was calling on "all governments concerned to set aside appropriate marine areas as national parks and reserves and to take action to extend the boundaries of existing terrestrial national parks and reserves to include representative marine ecosystems." President Richard Nixon signed a series of bills including the Coastal Zone Management Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Clean Air Act. He also signed the Marine Protection, Research, and Sanctuaries Act on October 23, 1973, officially establishing the National Marine Sanctuary Program.

*The 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill was one of the driving forces behind the creation of the sanctuaries program.*

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On January 30, 1975, the first national marine sanctuary, USS *Monitor* National Marine Sanctuary off the coast of North Carolina, was established. This less than one-square mile area protects the remains of the USS *Monitor*, an ironclad ship from the Civil War that had only recently been found. Later that year, the Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary was created to protect 103 square nautical miles of coral reef.

The goal of the program is to "preserve the extraordinary scenic beauty, biodiversity, historical connections, and economic productivity of our most precious underwater treasures." This includes coordinating and assisting scientific research efforts, working with native populations to respect cultural and historic traditions, and more. Volunteers also help carry out this mission. In 2021 alone,



*The first US marine sanctuary protects the remains of the USS Monitor.*

# This Day in History... October 23, 1972 continued

## National Marine Sanctuaries



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*Sheet of 16 stamps issued to mark the 50th anniversary of the National Marine Sanctuary Program*

volunteers contributed over 40,000 hours to our national marine sanctuaries. In the past 17 years, that number exceeds 100,000.

As of early 2022, there were 15 designated national marine sanctuaries and two national marine monuments, protecting over 620,000 square miles of US waters. Most of these are in the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, but two are in the Great Lakes. National marine sanctuaries help ensure the survival of some of our most vulnerable ecosystems. Thanks to our sanctuaries, we can continue to enjoy our oceans and lakes, and the flora and fauna that call them home.

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The act was only a few pages long, but it authorized the secretary of Commerce to study, establish, and manage national marine sanctuaries. The program was officially managed by the newly created National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The program spent the next few years studying federal and state park systems, communicating with scientists, government officials, marine specialists, and more to outline the regulations that would dictate their work in the decades to come.

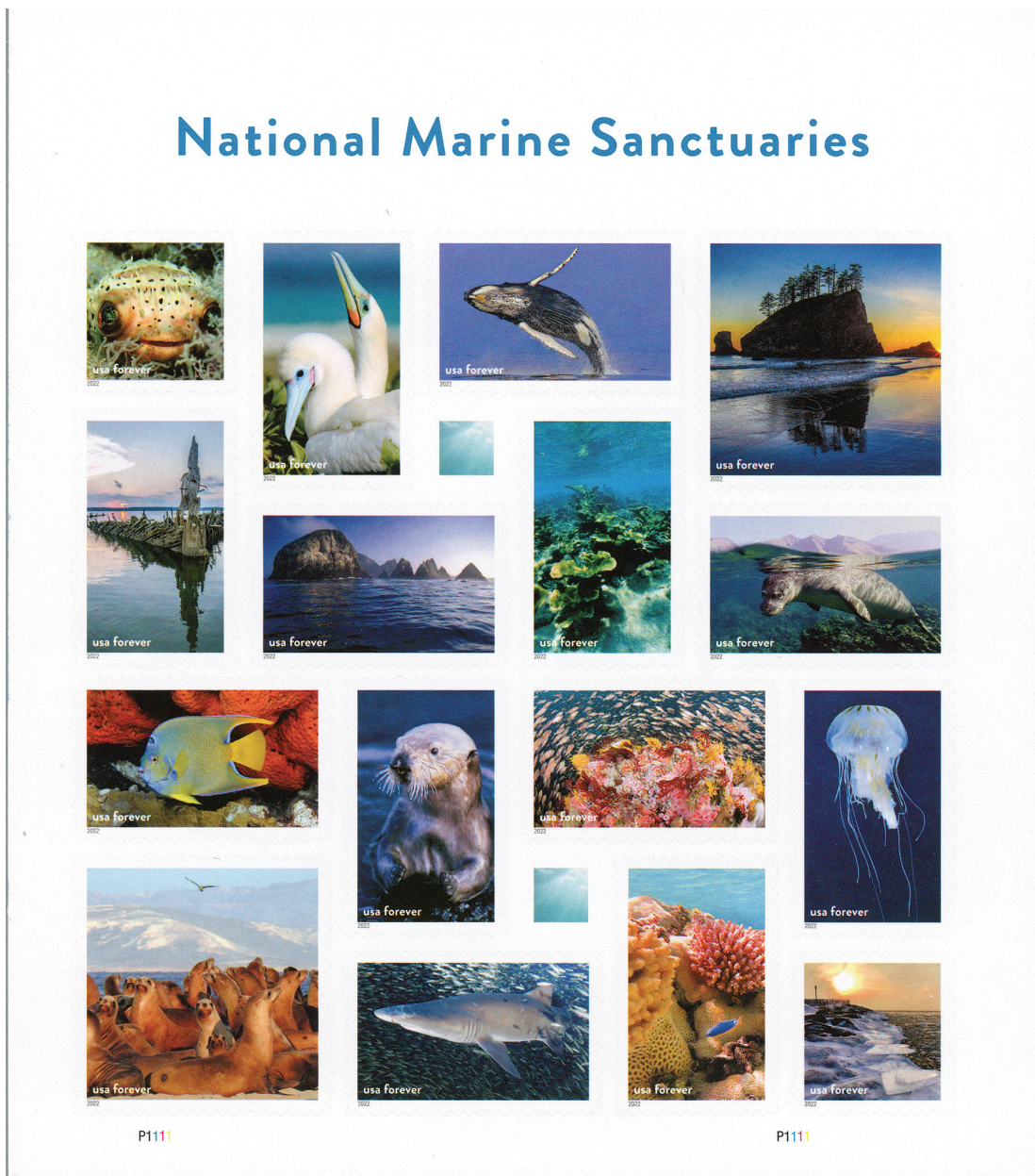
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