

# Marine Life and Habitat

A Project of the Northeast Regional Planning Body



**P**eople have treasured our region's marine life, such as the North Atlantic right whale, piping plover, Atlantic cod, and oyster, for millennia. Today, some species and their habitats—where they live, eat, and breed—are struggling amid a rapidly changing climate and the effects of human activities. Understanding the distribution and abundance of key species and their habitats, and how those habitats are changing, can help us preserve and protect marine life for future generations.

The Northeast Regional Planning Body (RPB) was established under the National Ocean Policy to develop an ocean plan for New England waters. Guided by its *Framework for Ocean Planning in the Northeast United States*, the RPB is working to characterize the abundance and distribution of marine mammals, sea turtles, birds, and fish for use in regional ocean planning.

## Project Goals

The purpose of this project is to develop scientifically sound maps and other products on species abundance and distribution that regulatory agencies can use in decision-making. For example, these maps can help agencies make decisions about permitting for energy projects, obtaining sand for beach re-nourishment, or siting aquaculture projects.

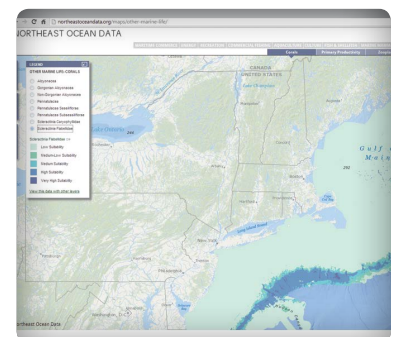
Extensive data resources about New England's marine life are available, with most focusing on particular species or habitats. This project aims to integrate those data into easily understood maps for use in regulatory decisions and to identify areas of ecological importance. To achieve these aims, a number of challenges must be overcome, such as communicating the relative scientific certainty of potential conclusions and better understanding natural and human-induced environmental shifts.

## Project Team

The Marine Life Data and Analysis Team (MDAT), composed of Duke University's Marine Geospatial Ecology Lab, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Center for Coastal Ocean Science, Loyola University, and the Ecosystem Assessment Branch of the NOAA Northeast Fisheries Science Center, is developing models and maps for the RPB. In addition, **E&C Enviroscap** is supporting ocean planning staff by reviewing draft and final products, managing work groups, and integrating final products into the Northeast Ocean Data Portal ([www.northeastoceandata.org](http://www.northeastoceandata.org)).



Credit: NEFSC/NOAA



Northeast Ocean Data Portal map of corals ([www.northeastoceandata.org](http://www.northeastoceandata.org)).



The study area for this project extends north into Canadian waters and south to Hudson Canyon.



## For more information

To learn more about this and other ocean planning activities in New England, go to [noceanplanning.org](http://noceanplanning.org), scan the QR code below, or contact John Weber ([jweber@northeastoceancouncil.org](mailto:jweber@northeastoceancouncil.org)) or Nick Napoli ([nnapoli@northeastoceancouncil.org](mailto:nnapoli@northeastoceancouncil.org)).



## Work Groups

Three work groups (on **marine mammals and sea turtles**, **marine birds**, and **fish**), composed of RPB agency staff, academics, and scientists from industry and environmental organizations, are supporting the development of marine life products. Their charge is to recommend data sources and methods, review draft and final products, and identify longer-term data and science priorities for consideration by the RPB and others.

## Accomplishments

### Stakeholder Participation

In addition to establishing the work groups, the RPB has been engaging the environmental advocacy community, marine scientists, and other interested parties to obtain guidance and recommendations for developing and using maps of marine life distribution and abundance.

- In early 2013, ocean planning staff and RPB members met with 20 conservation organizations from across the region to better understand marine life conservation issues.
- In June 2014, the RPB held a **Natural Resources Workshop**. Participants provided input on data and methods for characterizing marine life distribution and abundance, and on the use of other available natural resource assessments for ocean planning.
- In August 2014, the RPB held a public webinar to provide updates and obtain input.
- In October 2014, the RPB held a series of public meetings focusing on marine life mapping, identification of important ecological areas, and the use of this information in regulatory decision-making.

### Mapping Marine Life and Habitats

- Data products from previous collaborative efforts characterizing fish and shellfish, marine mammals and sea turtles, and other marine life (primary production and zooplankton) are already available on the Northeast Ocean Data Portal. Products resulting from the collaboration of MDAT and regional scientists will be integrated into the data portal in summer and fall of 2015.
- The June 2014 **Draft Summary of Marine Life Data Sources and Approaches to Define Ecologically Important Areas and Measure Ocean Health** reflects the input provided by the project team and stakeholders. The report notes that it is critical to understand the management application of potential assessment approaches to consider their use in regional ocean planning.

### Next Steps

Expert work groups will continue to meet throughout the year to inform the development of marine life products. Members of the public will continue to be engaged through webinars, workshops, and other public venues as the RPB determines how to integrate natural resource data and how to use those data to achieve regional ocean planning goals and objectives.