

In 1972, a century after the first national park in the United States was established at Yellowstone, legislation was passed to create the National Marine Sanctuaries Program. The intent of this legislation was to provide protection to selected coastal habitats similar to that existing for land areas designated as national parks.

The designation of an area as a marine sanctuary indicates that it is a protected area, just as a national park is.

People are permitted to visit and observe there, but living organisms and their environments may not be harmed or removed.

The National Marine Sanctuaries Program is administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a branch of the United States Department of Commerce.

Initially, 70 sites were proposed as candidates for sanctuary status.

Two and a half decades later, only fifteen sanctuaries had been designated, with half of these established after 1978.

They range in size from the very small (less than 1 square kilometer) Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary in American Samoa to the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary in California, extending over 15,744 square kilometers.

The National Marine Sanctuaries Program is a crucial part of new management practices in which whole communities of species, and not just individual species, are offered some degree of protection from habitat degradation and overexploitation.

Only in this way can a reasonable degree of marine species diversity be maintained in a setting that also maintains the natural interrelationships that exist among these species.

Several other types of marine protected areas exist in the United States and other countries.

The National Estuarine Research Reserve System, managed by the United States government, includes 23 designated and protected estuaries.

Outside the United States, marine protected-area programs exist as marine parks, reserves, and preserves.

Over 100 designated areas exist around the periphery of the Caribbean Sea.

Others range from the well-known Australian Great Barrier Reef Marine Park to lesser-known parks in countries such as Thailand and Indonesia, where tourism is placing growing pressures on fragile coral reef systems.

As state, national, and international agencies come to recognize the importance of conserving marine biodiversity, marine protected areas.

whether as sanctuaries, parks, or estuarine reserves, will play an increasingly important role in preserving that diversity.