

# 2024 Ocean Conservation Work Group

## Work Plan and Progress Report

**Reporting Period:** January 2024 – December 2024

**Work Group webpage:**

<https://www.midatlanticocean.org/ocean-planning/work-groups-collaborative-efforts/ocean-conservation/>

**Work Group Lead:**

- State: Kevin Hassell, New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP)
- Regional: Jes Watts, Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO)

**Work Group Members:** Work Group membership is open to government and non-governmental entities operating in the 5 Mid-Atlantic states that are willing to participate in the activities of the work group. Members are expected to contribute on monthly work group calls and assist with implementation of projects.

**2024 Member Roster:**

First Name	Last Name	Organization
Greg	Atkin	National Aquarium
Isabella	Betancourt	New York Department of State (NYDOS)
Avalon	Bristow	Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO)
Merry	Camhi	Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)
Noah	Chesnin	Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)
Ryan	Green	Virginia Coastal Zone Management (VA CZM)
Brent	Greenfield	National Ocean Policy Coalition
Terra	Haight	New York Department of State (NYDOS)
Deena	Hansen	Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Marine Minerals Program
Devon	Haines	New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP)
Kevin	Hassel	New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP)
LeAnn	Hogan	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
Alexandria	Horan	New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP)
Kristi	Lieske	Delaware DNREC

Tony	MacDonald	OPC; Monmouth University UCI
Laura	McKay	Ocean Conservationist
Jay	Odell	MARCO Fisheries; Monmouth University UCI
Paul	Ticco	New York Department of State (NYDOS)
Karl	Vilacoba	MARCO Data Portal; Monmouth University UCI
Jes	Watts	Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO)

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**Work Group Goals, Objectives, and Actions:** This work builds on Healthy Ocean Ecosystem Actions 1, 2 and 6 of the 2016 Mid-Atlantic Ocean Action Plan:

- Action 1: Identify ecologically rich areas of the ocean in the Mid-Atlantic region and increase understanding of those areas to foster more informed decision making. (p. 40)
- Action 2: Map shifts in ocean species and habitats. (p. 41)
- Action 6: Incorporate Traditional Knowledge of Tribes regarding ocean health in regional ocean planning in the Mid-Atlantic. (p.44)

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**ACTIVITY 1:** Plan, organize, and host quarterly informational webinars and roundtable dialogues to discuss ocean usage interests of the Mid-Atlantic region.

**Expected Completion Date:** Ongoing

**Progress Period:** January 2024 - June 2024

In February, the OCWG hosted a webinar, [Dive into Sea Turtle Research Planning in Support of Impact Assessment for US Atlantic Offshore Wind](#), featuring Dr. Susan Barco. Dr. Barco showcased recommendations from the Sea Turtle Chapter of the Regional Wildlife Science Collaborative for Offshore Wind ([RWSC Science Plan](#)). The webinar attracted 108 registered attendees spanning all 5 MARCO states, federal and state agencies, Tribes, as well as members of the public across and beyond the region. Jay Odell moderated a Question and Answer session following the presentation.

**Progress Period:** July 2024 - December 2024

No additional webinars due to the Ocean Conservation Symposium.

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**ACTIVITY 2:** Plan and host an Ocean Conservation Symposium.

**Expected Completion Date:** December 2024

**Progress Period:** January 2024 - June 2024

Planning underway for an Ocean Conservation Symposium to be hosted at Monmouth University in Long Branch, New Jersey from 01-03 October, 2024. The draft agenda includes presentations on the state of the science of ocean conservation, panel discussions on traditional ecological knowledge, community programs and workforce development opportunities in ocean conservation, as well as a poster presentation event and an off-site field trip sponsored by MACAN.

**Progress Period:** July 2024 - December 2024

The Mid-Atlantic Ocean Conservation Symposium convened from Oct. 1-3, 2024, at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey. Organized by MARCO's Ocean Conservation Work Group, this free public event brought together regional experts and stakeholders to share knowledge and inspire actionable strategies for marine conservation. The focus centered on the state of ocean conservation in the Mid-Atlantic, providing a platform for dialogue through presentations, interactive discussions, and field tours. Participants gained a deeper understanding of the challenges facing Mid-Atlantic ocean ecosystems and committed to advancing conservation efforts through collaborative initiatives.

The three-day event featured presentations and discussions on key topics, including the health of Mid-Atlantic ecosystems and the impacts of climate change on ocean environments. Regional experts presented key indicators of marine health, explored sustainable ocean use, and highlighted ongoing research efforts and conservation priorities for critical species. A session dedicated to conservation management strategies and policy covered effective management practices, including area-based and ecosystem-based approaches. Participants also learned about cutting-edge technologies, such as underwater gliders and environmental DNA analysis, which are transforming the monitoring of marine ecosystems.

The symposium culminated in a World Café Workshop, where participants shared diverse perspectives on what is needed for ocean conservation in the region, and to provide considerations for the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Planning Committee's future work plans. Five tables focused on specific objectives, including leveraging scientific data for management and identifying workforce needs in ocean conservation.

Symposium Objectives:

1. Provide a platform for the scientific community to share the latest research findings, methodologies, and best practices related to marine conservation in the Mid-Atlantic region, thereby facilitating informed decision-making.
2. Create opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration and partnership building among diverse stakeholders, including state agencies, federal agencies, Tribes, academic institutions, NGOs, and industry representatives.

3. Inspire participants to develop actionable strategies and initiatives that contribute to the conservation and stewardship of marine wildlife and habitats in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Recordings of the panel talks and presentations were posted to the [2024 Mid-Atlantic Ocean Conservation Symposium](#) event page

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**ACTIVITY 3:** Utilize the Mid-Atlantic Data Portal to visualize and quantify shifting species, habitats and current and proposed conservation measures in the Mid-Atlantic.

**Expected Completion Date:** Ongoing

**Progress Period:** January 2024 - June 2024

The Marine-life Data Analysis Team began work on a series of map products for the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast Ocean Data Portals designed to show changes over time for the endangered North Atlantic right whale. For each month of the year, these will show density from 2003-2009, density from 2010-2019, and 2010-2019 minus 2003-2009 – visualized with a log scale. The final map is intended to depict areas that saw the most change.

Eight MDAT data products that depict the total abundance and species richness of marine mammals in the western North Atlantic (U.S. East Coast) that are vulnerable to climate change were published on the Portal in January. The new data products can be found in the Portal's Marine Life theme by clicking on the "Marine Mammals" dropdown. They include Vulnerability to Climate Change: Abundance; Vulnerability to Climate Change: Species Richness; Sensitivity to Climate Related Changes in Abundance: Abundance; Sensitivity to Climate Related Changes in Abundance: Species Richness; Sensitivity to Climate Related Changes in Distribution: Abundance; Sensitivity to Climate Related Changes in Distribution: Species Richness; Sensitivity to Climate Related Changes in Phenology: Abundance; and Sensitivity to Climate Related Changes in Phenology: Species Richness.

Through a collaboration with the MDAT, the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast portals updated their marine life libraries to include updated marine bird distribution model data products developed by the NOAA National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science (NCCOS), the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and several other research institutions. Whereas previous versions of the data products included seasonal estimates of relative density, the updated data products are monthly estimates. A total of 49 individual marine bird species were modeled. MDAT updated the existing marine bird species group products from these updated individual species models. Species group products include spatial groups (e.g., nearshore species and offshore species), ecological groups (e.g., surface plungers, benthic/bivalve eaters), species of concern (e.g., state-listed species), and stressor groups (e.g., higher collision sensitivity).

Members of the Portal team explored the federal America the Beautiful Atlas with an eye toward identifying potential data additions that could fill gaps on the Portal. An initial list of roughly a half dozen candidates is being examined for further consideration as additions in the second half of 2024.

**Progress Period:** July 2024 - December 2024

A new collection of map layers showing NOAA-designated Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) for seven fish species and groups on the East Coast are now available on the Portal. The purpose of HAPCs is to focus conservation, management, and research efforts on subsets of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) that are vulnerable to degradation or are especially important ecologically for federally managed fish. Portal users can click the "Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC)" dropdown in either the Conservation or Habitat themes to view layers showing HAPCs for [Atlantic Cod](#), [Bluefin Tuna](#), [Lemon Shark](#), [Sand Tiger Shark](#), [Sandbar Shark](#), [Tilefish](#), and [Multiple Species](#). For convenience, the collection also includes a [HAPC- All Layers](#) option to activate all of the layers at once.

Members of the Portal team continued to evaluate data available on the federal America the Beautiful Atlas and settled on five map layers for inclusion. These maps (not all of which will be in the Conservation theme) will be included in the 2025 Portal work plan for consideration and approval by the OMDT.

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**ACTIVITY 4:** Community Engagement & Outreach

**Expected Completion Date:** Ongoing

**Progress Period:** January 2024 - June 2024

**Activity 4.1:** Foster partnerships with Aquarium Conservation teams across the Mid-Atlantic

Members of the work group and the New York Aquarium staff and Hudson Canyon Sanctuary Advisory Council representatives began exploratory discussions on potential avenues to collaborate on educational outreach about the canyon in New Jersey. The group held an initial discussion with Jenkinson's Aquarium about partnering on meetings at its facility, tabling with the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal and educational materials on the boardwalk, and other ideas to be developed in the summer and fall.

**Activity 4.2:** Develop and implement comprehensive training sessions on the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal for stakeholders with interests in conservation topics or at conservation-themed events.

A presentation on the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal was delivered to the Hudson Canyon Sanctuary Advisory Council at its first public meeting, held in April at Monmouth University. The Portal project manager offered a background description of the Portal followed by a live demonstration of its deep collection of map layers and tools. The demo highlighted several maps that can help users learn about the canyon and visualize its significance to marine life, the fishing industry and the region's ecosystem.

Members of the Work Group served on the planning committee for the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Forum, held in May in Lewes, Delaware, helping incorporate ocean conservation themes throughout the

event. Among the many conservation-oriented discussions was a breakout session focused on Mid-Atlantic Marine Sanctuaries, moderated by Leann Hogan of the NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. The session offered attendees an opportunity to learn and ask questions about the Hudson Canyon proposal process and lessons learned from the recently enacted Lake Ontario National Marine Sanctuary in New York.

**Progress Period:** July 2024 - December 2024

A Portal training session was conducted in December for students at the Harbor School, a maritime-focused high school on Governor's Island in New York City. The students were preparing a policy memo articulating their proposed boundaries and rules for the Hudson Canyon Marine Sanctuary and planned to use the Portal to aid their analysis.

A testing table was manned during the poster session at the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Conservation Symposium in October at which attendees could view and test a Portal mobile app under development by students and staff at Monmouth University. Input received at the session was used to fine-tune the technology in preparation for its release.

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**ACTIVITY 5:** Explore Shellfish and Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) Aquaculture as an ocean conservation tool

**Expected Completion Date:** Ongoing

**Progress Period:** January 2024 - June 2024

MARCO staff joined the newly convened Aquaculture Information Exchange.

Planning is underway for an Ocean Conservation Symposium session related to this activity, including:

- Indigenous aquaculture practices in the Mid-Atlantic & contributions to conservation goals
- How aquaculture helps to build resilient communities and contribute to a sustainable ocean economy

**Progress Period:** July 2024 - December 2024

Work Group is exploring if and how to continue this Activity in 2025

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