

A man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a vibrant, multi-colored floral shirt, is shown in profile from the chest up. He is looking out towards a bright, slightly hazy ocean with waves breaking in the distance. The background is a soft-focus view of the sea and sky.

PROTECTING OUR OCEAN

.....

A TOOLKIT FOR ACHIEVING FEDERAL OCEAN AND COASTAL PROTECTIONS

.....

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INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW: LATINO CONNECTIONS TO OCEAN AND COAST

Coastal communities are increasingly susceptible to the outcomes of environmental pollution and accelerating climate change including through sea level rise, coastal dead zones, flooding, and coastal disasters. These same communities are experiencing significant growth in Latino populations, many of which are among the most vulnerable to coastal threats that continue to increase in severity and frequency. Latinos and other communities of color, traditionally and contemporarily excluded and underserved, should have equitable access to a clean and safe ocean and coast for recreation, livelihoods, and culture. To achieve this, wetland, coastal, reef, and underwater ecosystems should be protected and restored to improve coastal resilience to sea level rise, floods, natural disasters, storm surges, and other effects of climate change. Furthermore, the ocean should be pollution- and plastic-free, as well as free of the threats of offshore drilling and mining and unsustainable commercial fishing that harm local communities and the global climate alike.

Within the U.S., marine and coastal areas are central to many Latino communities who live near, rely on, are impacted by, and connected to, the ocean. These areas play vital roles in Latino jobs, health, culture, history, and spirituality. Therefore, they are deeply connected to our stories, provide a place for families and friends to connect and relax, offer ample opportunities to create memories with loved ones, provide food and medicine, and are economic drivers across mainland U.S. and U.S. territories. Furthermore, the coral reefs and mangrove forests protect us from storms, while coastal wetlands filter our waters.

WHAT'S INSIDE THIS REPORT, AND WHO IS IT FOR?

To help achieve marine and coastal resilience, ecosystem health, sustainable economies, and inclusive and accurate narratives of coastal communities, this toolkit provides an overview of some major federal designations of lands and waters in the U.S. and its territories that can help protect the environmental, cultural, and economic resources within and around them. Latino communities and allies can advocate for these designations in a culturally relevant and accessible way.

This report is intended to be a resource for media, advocacy, education, and movement building—for everyone who cares about a healthy ocean and wants to better understand the ways we can protect it and advocate on its behalf. This toolkit was a collective creation of the Hispanic Access team and our Olas y Acción leadership network (formerly known as the Ocean Advisory Council), with additional content and editing provided by Latino Climate Council member Emma Galofré García. More information on our leadership networks can be found at hispanicaccess.org.

RECOGNIZING INDIGENOUS HISTORY¹

We recognize that conservation as it has traditionally been practiced by dominant groups and decision makers has harmed the rights of Indigenous peoples across the world.² Setting aside protected areas violates human rights when done without the proper consultation and consent of the Indigenous Nations of these places.³ This approach is not only a human rights violation, but also counterproductive to achieving biodiversity goals, given that biodiversity is highest in areas led by Indigenous groups.⁴ Therefore, equitably protecting the ocean and coast requires active engagement and planning by Indigenous communities tied to these lands, as a first step toward remedying this ongoing injustice.

All Indigenous communities are distinct and have distinct practices, histories, and statuses with respect to national and local governments. While there are general practices that are helpful in moving conservation towards just implementation with such approaches like Indigenous-led conservation, and therefore policies that can be applied broadly, it is important to respect and center Indigenous sovereignty specific to the policy or management practice of focus. This means that each potential policy or program must be an ongoing dialogue with the present and ancestral Indigenous guardians of the lands and waters in question and utilize the practices, such as land back (i.e. returning Native lands),⁵ co-management of lands and waters,⁶ restoring animal husbandry practices⁷, or other methods that are identified by the Indigenous nations as the most appropriate for the particular circumstance.

Any activities taking place on current or ancestral Indigenous lands must adhere to the policy of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent, as recognized in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁸ This requires governments to treat Tribal nations as equals and to implement a mechanism for dispute resolution when these rights are violated.⁹ Maintaining these rights are essential to the goal of protecting at least 30 percent of the world's land, waters, and ocean by 2030, a movement known as "30x30," and to implementing conservation practices and climate actions that further justice rather than infringing it.

The case studies explored within this toolkit are all on Indigenous lands and waters, spanning over dozens of Tribal Nations, including Native Hawaiians, the Northern Chumash, the Coast Miwok, and many more. While we provide examples of how the designations can be utilized to protect our coasts and oceans, it is important to adhere to the processes identified above and recognize that these lands are Indigenous lands first and foremost.

ANY ACTIVITIES TAKING PLACE ON CURRENT OR ANCESTRAL INDIGENOUS LANDS MUST ADHERE TO THE POLICY OF FREE, PRIOR, AND INFORMED CONSENT, AS RECOGNIZED IN THE UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES.⁸

WHY ARE MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IMPORTANT TO LATINO COMMUNITIES?¹⁰

LATINO HEALTH

- In 2010, 49% of Latinos lived in coastal shoreline counties, which has likely increased in the last 13 years.¹¹
- The health impacts of sea level rise are disproportionately felt by Black and Hispanic communities and those who are un- or under-insured, unemployed, or residing in substandard housing.
 - Sea level rise increases the risk for drowning, injury, indoor mold outbreaks, respiratory illnesses, housing instability, disruptions to infrastructure, adverse pregnancy outcomes, mental health impacts, and disease transmission.¹²
 - Latinos are 47% more likely to live in high-impact coastal flooding areas, particularly in the Southeast-Atlantic region.¹³
- Beach and fishery advisories and closures—or a lack thereof—disproportionately impact Latinos. Some states, such as Florida, have no regulations to announce beach and fishery advisories and closures, and many more do not share information in Spanish.
- Latinos are among the most susceptible to health issues following visits to polluted beaches that remain open for recreation.
- Latino anglers, including those who fish to consume and subsistence fishers, are less likely to be aware of fishery advisories.
- Climate change poses an increasing threat to subsistence fishers, many of whom are immigrants, people of color, and/or low-income through damage to docks, shorelines, and vegetation; changing migratory patterns and loss of wildlife from damaged habitats, increasing temperatures, and ocean acidification; storms that damage or wash out access points to fishers; and increasing pollution.¹⁴



- Reduced access to safe outdoor areas contributes to nature-deficit disorder, limits opportunities for exercise and may present obstacles to doctor-prescribed outdoor recreation.¹⁵
- Systemic and environmental racism have caused poverty, economic instability, health challenges, and reduced access to social and political resources among many Latinos. This lack of resources puts coastal Latinos into an “elevated coastal hazard risk category” with increased vulnerability to the consequences of climate change.
- The ongoing loss of estuarine wetlands contributes to Latinos’ increased susceptibility to coastal hazards, including sea level rise and storms.

LATINO CULTURAL HERITAGE AND HISTORY

- Coastal sites throughout the U.S. safeguard and honor Latino heritage. Contemporary Latino culture also thrives at other sites, existing and emergent, fostering strong coastal communities and connection to place.
 - These sites include Cumberland Island in Georgia, Padre Island National Seashore in Texas, Assateague Island in Maryland, San Juan Island in Washington, Monterey Bay in California, and many more.

LATINO RECREATION

- 4.4 million Latinos participate in fishing, averaging more outings per year than the general fishing population. 17% of Latinos participate in fishing, and 12% participate in boating.¹⁷
- The Californian Latino beachgoer is typically a millennial parent with children visiting the beach as part of a large group. Their beach-going concerns are related to parking costs, overnight accommodations and the lack of public transportation options enabling their trips to the beach.¹⁸
- In Oregon, half of the Latino population participates in coastal activities.
- Latino or Spanish-speaking people are enthusiastic visitors to parks in the Chesapeake Bay, and at some sites they comprise a significant proportion or majority of park users. At Maryland’s Sandy Point State Park, for example, a 2015 survey showed that 80% of users identified as Spanish-speaking but only 3% were aware of the facility’s nature programs.¹⁹
- While Latinos are enthusiastic water recreation users, access and inclusion to recreational sites are often impeded by a lack of multilingual signage, information, and culturally relevant information for Latino visitors.

LATINO JOBS AND ECONOMY

- More data on the role Latinos play in the marine economy is needed, but it’s reasonable to infer the role is significant. The states with the largest Latino populations—California and



Texas—are also the states with the greatest contributions to the U.S. ocean and coastal economy. Three of the top five largest states with Latinos—California, Florida and New York—are among the five largest contributors to ocean-based tourism and recreation.²⁰

- Information is also needed on Latino roles in commercial fishing. For example, an Associated Press investigation found hundreds of undocumented workers confined on commercial fishing boats in unsanitary conditions in Hawaii, earning as little as \$.70 per hour.²¹
- More than 18 million people in the U.S. visit estuary and coastal waters each year for recreation and tourism. Ocean-based tourism and recreation alone, contributes approximately \$124 billion in GDP and 2.4 million jobs.
- Nationwide, the leisure and hospitality industry is 24% Hispanic and/or Latino. Nearly one third of workers in the U.S. construction industry are Hispanic and/or Latino; as marine construction is concentrated in California, Florida and Texas, Latinos are a large part of this ocean economic sector.²²
- Latinos are 50% more likely to live in areas with the highest estimated increases in traffic delays due to coastal flooding.²³

LATINO PUBLIC OPINION

- 83% of Latino voters in the West, and 89% in the Chesapeake region, support setting a national goal of conserving 30% of U.S. land, inland waters, and ocean by the year 2030 (known as 30x30).^{24 25}
- 89% of Latino voters in the Chesapeake region support the creation of new marine sanctuaries to protect ocean waters and wildlife.
- Relative to other demographics, Latinos are most likely to find the ocean very important for their emotional well-being.²⁶
- In California, Latinos are more likely than other adults to see plastics and marine debris as a big problem along their local coast, and view urban development as a big problem for wildlife habitats and endangered species.
- 62% of Latinos in California are in favor of wind and wave energy projects off the coast.



TYPES OF NATIONAL MARINE AND COASTAL DESIGNATIONS, AND HOW TO ACHIEVE THEM

NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES



National marine sanctuaries are underwater sites protected because of their natural or cultural features. Although the term “marine” suggests saltwater areas, national marine sanctuaries can also include the Great Lakes waters. A national marine sanctuary may be designated either by the Secretary of the Department of Commerce, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), or the U.S. Congress under the Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act, or by the President under the Antiquities Act as a marine national monument. National marine sanctuaries and Marine National Monuments are managed by The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries within NOAA. The National Marine Sanctuary System currently consists

of 17 protected areas: 15 National Marine Sanctuaries and the Papahānaumokuākea and Rose Atoll Marine National Monuments.

NOAA’s sanctuary nomination process is a public, community-based process by which a collection of interested individuals or groups can identify and recommend special areas of the marine or Great Lakes environment for possible designation as a National Marine Sanctuary.²⁷ NOAA itself can also nominate a site on the basis that all sites deserving of sanctuary status don’t necessarily have local community capacity to develop a nomination. Nominated sites must then undergo a public scoping process during which the agency drafts designation documents for public review and eventually makes a final decision in consultation with the relevant governors and Congress.²⁸ There are currently 3 sites under review for National Marine Sanctuary status: Chumash Heritage, Lake Ontario, and Hudson Canyon.²⁹

For a detailed review of the designation process, check out our partner toolkit, [Creating a National Marine Sanctuary](#) by The National Marine Sanctuary Foundation.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

National Wildlife Refuges are terrestrial and aquatic protected areas managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The National Wildlife Refuge System consists of over 560 refuges that protect iconic native, migratory, and endangered species. The main purpose of the refuge system is to uphold wildlife and habitat conservation, and each refuge identifies its own purpose, recreational activities, and resources management tools. Although each refuge is unique, whether a marine national monument or a waterfowl production area, they all serve the conservation of native species, though not all are available for public use.

Designating or expanding a National Wildlife Refuge starts with identifying or proposing a site either by FWS or by Tribal, State, or local partners. Proposed sites then must undergo a formal planning process, which often includes relevant partners and advisors. The purpose of any new refuge is designed through law, proclamation, executive order, agreement, public land order, donation document, or administrative memorandum. Wildlife refuges may be established through an act of Congress or by administrative action, through the U.S. Fish & Wildlife.³⁰

National Wildlife Refuges' current Chief, Cynthia Martinez, is the first-ever Latino to lead the refuge system. FWS and the refuge system have been working to employ more Latinos into STEM and interpretation roles through fellowships and partnerships with Hispanic Access Foundation and Latino Outdoors. The Urban National Wildlife Refuge System Program works to clear social and historical barriers and foster new connections that advance conservation and outdoor recreation for those living in and around cities. The refuge system provides spaces for Latinos to create memories, conserve our lands, and be a part of the change.



Cynthia Martinez
Chief, National Wildlife Refuge

NATIONAL PARKS

National Parks are large areas of federally protected public lands and waters designated by the U.S. Congress due to "outstanding scenic feature or natural phenomena."³¹ Of all the nationally protected areas, National Parks stand out for being generally much larger and are often globally recognized as a destination. The National Park system was established to have two primary missions, to "both conserve park resources and provide for their use and enjoyment 'in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired' for future generations." National Parks provide recreational areas that are largely accessible for all citizens and visitors to the U.S., and hold significant inspirational, educational, and recreational values.

To be considered for nomination as a National Park, the proposed area must "possess nationally significant natural, cultural or recreational resources," should be feasible as an addition to the larger National Park system, and must be under "direct [National Park Service] management instead of protection by some other government agency or by the private sector."³² If the proposed area meets all the requirements, an act of Congress can officially create the new park.

Marine and coastal environments are equally eligible for a National Park designation, like Biscayne National Park in Southern Florida, which was established in 1980, and Point Reyes National Seashore, established in 1962. These marine environments and coastal ecosystems are in dire need of protection, and can oftentimes get overlooked by the more visible terrestrial parks (see case studies, below).

Other types of land, water, and ocean protections may also be designated as "units" of the National Park system, such as National Recreation Areas, National Historical Parks, National Trails, and more.³³

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the Nation’s historic places worthy of preservation. It is authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The National Park Service’s National Register of Historic Places is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect America’s historic and archaeological resources, including structures, districts, sites, and buildings, worthy of preservation. The properties are selected based on four criteria of importance:

- Site associated with a specific event, trend, or shift in history
- Site is associated with a historically significant figure or individual
- The site expresses distinctive architectural characteristics of a type, period, or form of construction
- Sites that are of prehistoric and historic significance holding importance to the past or future

Listing on the National Register of Historic Places does not imply ownership or management of the site by the federal government. Instructions on designating sites in the National Register can be found at [How to List a Property - National Register of Historic Places \(U.S. National Park Service\)](#).

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HISTORIC PRESERVATION OF LATINO HERITAGE SITES AND HOW THEY ARE DESIGNATED



[Place, Story and Culture: An Inclusive Approach to Protecting Latino Heritage Sites](#)

NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVES

The National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERR) is a network of 30 protected coastal sites that serve as study locations of estuarine ecosystems. NERRs encompass nearly 1.4 million acres of estuaries and are focused on stewardship, research, training, and education. Established through the Coastal Zone Management Act, NERRs represent a partnership program between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and coastal states. NOAA provides funding and national guidance, and each site is managed by a lead state agency with input from local partners.

NERRs encompass a diverse range of habitats including shallow open waters, freshwater and salt marshes, swamps, sandy beaches, mud and salt flats, rocky shores, oyster reefs, mangroves, river deltas, tidal pools, and seagrasses. These marine ecosystems are critical to various marine organisms that spend part of their life cycle in estuaries and who use estuaries to forage for food. Estuaries provide ecosystem services to human communities by protecting land from flooding, enhancing water quality, and providing numerous commercial and recreational benefits.³⁴

To designate a coastal site to be included in NERR, the state must initiate the process, after which, NOAA leads a group of partners through the remaining designation process. Current priorities for future designations include nominations that either include both a biogeographic subregion and an estuary type not represented by existing or developing reserves, or just includes an estuary type not represented by existing or developing reserves.³⁵



NATIONAL MONUMENTS

National Monuments are federally protected areas managed by the Federal government. The protection of these places is guaranteed for their scenic, environmental, educational, historic, cultural, or scientific value.³⁶ They can be ocean or land areas, but are restricted to the smallest area compatible with adequate preservation and management.

Unlike National Parks, National Monuments do not need to be approved by Congress in order to be established—they can be created either by an act of Congress or by presidential action. National Monuments are established through Congress or by Presidential Executive Action through the Antiquities Act. In 1906, Theodore Roosevelt signed the Antiquities Act into law granting the executive office the authority to establish national monuments. Since then, 17 presidents – nine Republicans and eight Democrats – have used the law to protect our natural and cultural heritage. Through the Antiquities Act, U.S. presidents have been able to protect hundreds of millions of acres of land and ocean that have significant cultural and historical significance.³⁷

**TO LEARN HOW TO GET INVOLVED AND
ADVOCATE FOR THESE POLICIES,
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Latino Advocacy Toolkit 2023](#)

Once National Monuments are established, the National Park Service or another federal bureau oversees its management. In the case of marine national monuments, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are the main federal agencies responsible for management.



CASE STUDIES

CHUMASH HERITAGE NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

“LATINOS ARE AMONG THE FASTEST-GROWING DEMOGRAPHICS LIVING ON THE OCEAN AND COAST, AS WELL AS AMONG NEW RECREATIONAL FISHERS, BOATERS AND OUTDOOR ENTHUSIASTS. YET OUR COMMUNITIES ARE ALSO AMONG THE MOST VULNERABLE TO AN OVER-POLLUTED OCEAN WITH DWINDLING NATURAL RESOURCES. PROTECTING THE CHUMASH HERITAGE NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY IS A STEP FOR PROGRESS ON THESE ISSUES AND IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BOOST OVERALL EQUITY AND WELL-BEING IN CALIFORNIA’S CENTRAL COAST REGION.”

MAITE ARCE

PRESIDENT AND CEO OF HISPANIC ACCESS FOUNDATION

The proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary is located along the Central California coastline, from Gaviota Creek in Santa Barbara to Santa Rosa Creek in Cambria, encompassing 156 miles of a culturally and biologically diverse seascape. The proposed sanctuary would connect two existing sanctuaries, preventing offshore oil drilling and preserving the area as a biodiversity hotspot. This marine sanctuary, which is the home to vital fisheries, would protect culturally sacred sites and the feeding grounds for numerous species of whales and dolphins, sea otters, kelp forests.³⁸

Climate change, human uses, and other threats present an imminent need to increase protections of our coastal waters and sacred Chumash sites on and offshore. This Indigenous-led sanctuary would strengthen Indigenous perspectives and cultural values in ocean conservation, demonstrating the connection between preserving our unique and irreplaceable coastal ecosystems and safeguarding thousands of years of Chumash cultural heritage and sacred sites, who along with other Tribes have stewarded its lands and waters since time immemorial. This designation will also mark a milestone toward the Biden’s Administration’s goal to conserve 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030 as outlined in

the America the Beautiful initiative, while also strengthening the tourism-based economy of the Central Coast by generating an estimated \$23 million in economic activity and creating 600 new jobs, stopping the threats of offshore oil expansion and acoustic testing, and providing funding for much needed local marine research.

To get involved in the effort to protect the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, sign up at <https://chumashsanctuary.org/volunteer/>.

FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, designated in 1990, protects 2,900 nautical miles of waters surrounding the Florida Keys, from Miami to the Tortugas.³⁹ It helps protect the third largest reef tract in the world, protecting corals, plants, animals, the ocean sea floor, seagrass beds, artificial reefs, and historical shipwrecks and maritime heritage. The ecosystems within the sanctuary provide extensive ecological benefits including carbon sequestration, habitat, coastal stabilization, and more.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary experiences various threats to the ecosystem, including pollution from sewage runoff, poor boater education leading to habitat destruction, invasive species (e.g. lionfish), overfishing of apex predators such as sharks in bordering areas, as well rising water temperatures and ocean acidification caused or exacerbated by climate change, and increasing instances of coral disease outbreaks.⁴⁰

The closest city to the sanctuary is Miami, Florida, which has a Hispanic population of 70.2%, making it the fourth largest majority-Latino city in the U.S. Naturally, it is well frequented and used by both local and visiting Latinos.



PELICAN ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge is located off the coast of Sebastian, Florida. It is also designated as a National Historic Landmark, a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention international treaty,⁴¹ and a candidate Marine Protected Area. In 1903, President Roosevelt, with the help of the Florida Audubon Society and avid brown pelican protector Paul Krogel, created Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge as the first federal bird reservation, giving birth to the National Wildlife Refuge System.



Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge is a small island with over 5,400 acres of surrounding protected waters, salt marshes, coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangrove islands, that hosts over 200 species of fish and 16 species of shorebirds and waterfowl. Such ecological diversity is at risk due to shoreline erosion, invasive species, habitat alteration, decline of biological diversity due to climate change, and land and water resource developments. It is critical for the Latino community to empower the tools of advocacy to help protect this national treasure.

BLACKWATER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, designated in 1933 near Cambridge, Maryland, was primarily established as a waterfowl sanctuary for migratory birds traveling along the Atlantic Flyway, a major flyway from Greenland south to the Atlantic Coast and further to the tropics of South America and the Caribbean. Additionally, about half of the refuge is designated as the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument.

The refuge, which is more than 28,000 acres, is located on Maryland's Eastern Shore in Dorchester County. Its landscape is made up of freshwater impoundments, open fields, mixed deciduous and evergreen forests, and brackish tidal wetlands. The name of the refuge comes from the color of the local rivers that feed into the refuge—the Blackwater River and the Little Blackwater River. Tannin picked up by the waters draining in the marshes creates the tea-colored water responsible for the refuge's name.

Despite the national protected status of the refuge, the refuge is constantly and increasingly threatened by the devastating consequences of a changing climate and global warming. For bodies of water like the Chesapeake Bay, one of the biggest threats is an increased water level and subsequent flooding. Scientists have predicted that the Chesapeake Bay will raise as much as 2.1 feet by the year 2050. Approximately 5,000 acres within the refuge have already turned into open water since the 1970s.

Not only does an increase in sea level cause flooding and drastic changes to the landscape of the refuge, but it also has a huge negative impact on the wildlife. Trees become submerged in the water where they can no longer live, leading to "ghost forests" of dead trees, resulting in habitat loss for the birds and other animals that reside in the forests. Additionally, climate change poses a significant threat to the preservation of the refuge's history, including the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument, which is an important and significant archaeological and historical site that highlights Black resistance and environmental knowledge and stewardship.

To protect the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge and the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument, a multitude of community members and partners must continue to work together. Both private landowners along the coast and public entities have a stake in the health of the refuge and the Chesapeake Bay overall. For access to green spaces for historically excluded and low income communities, for the protection of biodiversity and wildlife species, and for the health of our oceans and communities, we must continue to push for investments in combating climate change.

BISCAYNE BAY NATIONAL PARK

Located near the cities of Miami and Homestead, Florida, Biscayne Bay encompasses a marine ecosystem of 428 square miles, with a drainage area of 938 square miles, of which “350 are freshwater and coastal wetlands in Miami-Dade, Broward, and Monroe Counties.”⁴² It is also home to the largest marine National Park in the system, Biscayne National Park, established on June 28, 1980.

As a considerable marine ecosystem in South Florida, which includes marshlands, mangrove forests and culturally significant sites like shipwrecks, Biscayne Bay has garnered a lot of attention. Many years after the designation of Biscayne National Park in 1980, the Biscayne Bay Habitat Focus Area was created in 2015 in a joint effort between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and select stakeholders to address important environmental concerns, including declining water quality and fisheries habitat. The designation “created a nucleus of NOAA resources to attract partners from state and local governmental agencies and nongovernmental entities into productive partnerships to fight for the area’s well being against multiple growing threats.”⁴³

According to recent studies, the health of Biscayne Bay is quickly deteriorating. Pollution from storm runoff, plastic pollution and other hazardous materials that make their way into the bay are causing degradation of the ecosystem. Hyper-salinity and rising ocean temperatures have also contributed to the mass death of seagrass and coral, which has decimated fish numbers in the area.⁴⁴ Federally protecting larger areas of the Bay would increase the likelihood of ecosystem restoration, and lend a hand in establishing best practices for establishing and managing marine protected areas. Culturally, the Bay is a recreational haven— fishing, boating, and SCUBA/snorkeling activities are popular pastimes for a large number of Florida residents. The Latino community— the most populous ethnic group in Miami-Dade county— are especially vocal about the importance of protecting the Bay for future generations to experience and enjoy.⁴⁵



DRY TORTUGAS NATIONAL PARK

Dry Tortugas National Park, located outside of Homestead, Florida, was established in 1992 after abolishing Fort Jefferson by congressional order (see below). Dry Tortugas has been designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, National Park, National Marine Sanctuary, NOAA Ecological Reserve, and USDA Research Natural Area.

Dry Tortugas is characterized by a chain of seven coral reefs which make up a 'pseudo-atoll' that contain three predominant mud-bank type formations known as Loggerhead Key, Long Key and Pulaski Shoal. Another distinct feature of Dry Tortugas is Garden Key, which is the second largest island at approximately fourteen acres and is the specific location of Fort Jefferson, which was once designated as a National Monument (discussed below). Overall, Dry Tortugas can be characterized as a subtropical region with islands that contain myriad avian, terrestrial, and aquatic and marine wildlife, as well as a number of ecosystems from deep sea habitats, coral reefs, sea grasses, mangrove forests, beach-dune complexes, saltmarshes, and tropical hardwood trees. As a no-take zone, this park offers a sanctuary and spawning area for many economically beneficial fishes as well as an avian sanctuary, protecting numerous ecologically critical species. Yet, Dry Tortugas has been experiencing severe threats including global climate change, sea level rise, overfishing, plastic and light pollution, invasive species, illegal harvesting, and coastal development.

Due to its protected status, Dry Tortugas hosts various research stations and is used to study the health of the Gulf Coast and Caribbean as it relates to human-caused disturbances, the effects of global climate instability, and cultural and historic items found throughout the park.

Although the park is open to the public, factors that impact accessibility often disproportionately affect communities with less resources, including Latino communities.⁴⁶ Therefore, the benefits of the National Park often favor communities with more resources, exacerbating already existing inequalities.



POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE

Point Reyes National Seashore is a 71,000 acre park located on the coast of California, north of San Francisco. Its rich habitats of estuaries, bays, lagoons, and craggy cliffs support 1,500 species of plants and animals on and off the shoreline, including the iconic Tule Elk. It was established in the 1960s with the goal of becoming a first-rate park experience for underserved local families who could not afford the trip to Yosemite or Yellowstone National Park.

Unfortunately, in the decades preceding the Seashore's creation, ranchers violently seized lands within the future park, dispossessing the Indigenous Coast Miwok from their lands. When Point Reyes National Seashore was created, the ranchers' livestock operations were preserved and are now subsidized by taxpayers as a part of the National Park system. Today, commercial livestock production takes up one-third of the park's acreage, and almost 400 miles of fencing restricts public access, while also degrading the national park experience.

Additionally, the history of the Coast Miwok has been largely overlooked by the programming, signage, and facilities in the park, while the history of ranching is venerated and the ranchers' history of genocide overlooked. While livestock production flourishes on 28,000 acres of land, only 1.5 acres are dedicated to the Coast Miwok, in the Kule Loklo demonstration village,⁴⁷ which has been closed and neglected for over three years. The remaining ancestral home, sacred sites, burial sites, and shell mounds of the Coast Miwok are vulnerable to further degradation from ranching operations and climate change.

Current threats to the Seashore are primarily from the livestock production in the park, which produces pollution that threatens local ecosystems, contributes to climate change, and limits habitat access for the Tule Elk.⁴⁸ The pollution burden, lack of access, and overlooked histories primarily affects underserved families whom the park was originally meant to serve, and the Coast Miwok. The livestock production disqualifies Point Reyes from becoming a part of California's climate action plans and vision for protecting 30% of California's lands, waters, and ocean by 2030 as well as the Biden's Administration's goal to conserve 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030 as outlined in the America the Beautiful initiative

However, the park's original vision to phase out the ranches is still possible. Restoring this stunning landscape with the consultation of local Indigenous and underserved communities would demonstrate a just transition from a polluting industry, address California's increasing climate threats, increase economic activity from tourism and outdoor recreation, and make Point Reyes a model for restoring environmental justice and Indigenous knowledge and histories.

To learn more about efforts to preserve Indigenous history in Point Reyes, visit <https://www.alliance4felixcove.org/>.





ELKHORN SLOUGH NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE

Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve encompasses 1,700 acres of coastal land, including the largest tidal marsh in California. It is located seven miles inland from the coast, at the center of Monterey Bay, and serves as an essential habitat for hundreds of species of plants, animals, and birds, and is recognized as a Globally Important Bird Area by the American Birding Conservancy. Along with its diverse habitat for wildlife, Elkhorn Slough acts as a significant carbon sequester, as the wetlands, marsh, and mudflats store greenhouse gasses from the earth's atmosphere to slow the onset of climate change.

Threats to Elkhorn Slough include soil erosion, habitat loss, decrease in water quality, species diversity loss, and pesticide contamination. Many of these threats are caused or exacerbated by the large farming operations within the larger watershed. Since the erosion and natural resource degradation in the Elkhorn Slough watershed must be controlled at the source, many landowners, government, and environmental groups are interested in promoting sustainable resource management practices. However, the solutions pursued by these groups fail to consider the structural racism and discrimination facing these farming communities, which includes one of the largest percentages of Latino farmers and farm workers in the U.S. As such, the Latino community is subject to environmental injustice, including poor water quality and pesticide exposure, poor living conditions, flooding from levee failures, and wage discrimination.

For example, one solution to improve and protect the area's natural and agricultural resources was to create a permitting system. In order to farm these highly erodible lands, a farmer first needs to apply for a permit from the U.S. Department of Agriculture or another state agency. However, oftentimes, Latino farmers don't feel comfortable dealing with federal agencies and regulatory organizations. A recent study in the Elkhorn Slough watershed found that the farmers did not utilize the technical assistance or government support, primarily due to language barriers and white supremacy that maintained restricted access for Latino farmers, dismissing the typical ways information is disseminated across Latino communities, through family, friends, and trusted information sources. Therefore, protection and restoration of the Elkhorn Slough watershed relies on addressing environmental injustice and approaching environmental stewardship in an equitable and just way.

The Indigenous Ohlone inhabited the area around Elkhorn Slough and hunted deer, elk, sea otter, sea lions, quail, shellfish, and fish. Evidence of the foraging habits of the Ohlone exists at Elkhorn Slough in the form of middens—distinct concentrations of shell that contain evidence of past—found near Hummingbird Island.

FORT JEFFERSON NATIONAL MONUMENT

Fort Jefferson, also known as the “Guardian of the Gulf,” is located on Garden Key, which is part of the Dry Tortugas National Park (discussed above) and Florida Key National Marine Sanctuary systems. Fort Jefferson began construction in 1846 after Confederate Army General, Robert E. Lee, advocate to reserve Dry Tortugas exclusively for military use. Fort Jefferson is anywhere from 68 to 109 miles westward from Key West, Florida and can be accessed almost daily by chartered seaplane and private boats and ferries. Formerly a National Monument, established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on January 4, 1935, the fort’s designation status was removed after the establishment of Dry Tortugas as a National Park in 1992. Although Fort Jefferson is not recognized as a National Historic Site, it was included in the National Register of Historic Places in 1970.

Fort Jefferson is one of Dry Tortugas’ crown jewels and a leading attraction within the park. The island fortress appears larger than life, although unfinished, and has been described as the “largest brick masonry structure in the Western Hemisphere.”⁴⁹ It exceeds the size of numerous other forts within the U.S., expanding across approximately 17 acres of Garden Key.

Current threats to Fort Jefferson include hurricanes and other weather and climate related damages, sea level rise, inundation, unaddressed maintenance needs, saltwater and heat exposure, moisture, and rusting of the Totten shutter system.

Furthermore, access to Fort Jefferson is highly restrictive due to the large financial need to travel by seaplane, ferry, or private vessels. With its focus on U.S. military history, Latino, Black, and Indigenous narratives are erased. With the Fort’s lack of designation, there is an opportunity for community engagement and Latino leadership to shape the access, use, and narratives of the Fort and broader Dry Tortugas through a new designation process.





PAPAHĀNAUMOKUĀKEA MARINE NATIONAL MONUMENT

Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument is located off the coast of Hawaii and encompasses 582,578 square miles of the Pacific Ocean surrounding the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, an area larger than all of the U.S. National Parks combined. It is jointly managed by the Department of Commerce, the Department of the Interior, the State of Hawai'i, and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.⁵⁰ Native Hawaiian culture is a foundational element in the management of the monument.⁵¹

The monument was established in 2006 in a presidential proclamation by President George W. Bush under the Antiquities Act. In 2010, it was named as a UNESCO World Heritage Site because of its rich natural and cultural resources, and the monument was expanded by President Obama in 2016. A variety of endangered, endemic, and rare species inhabit the land and sea within the monument, and the area contains many archaeological and cultural sites significant to Native Hawaiian maritime heritage.

Such ecological and cultural significance is compromised by threats such as invasive species, which endanger native terrestrial and marine wildlife. Furthermore, plastic and material pollution endangers wildlife that get entangled in abandoned fishing gear. The climate crisis also changes the physical conditions like the acidity of the waters, making it unsuitable for wildlife to survive. In 2020, Congress directed the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to consider adding Papahānaumokuākea to the national marine sanctuary system to help address these issues and enhance the permanence of the site's protections.⁵²

Papahānaumokuākea is a prime example of how cultural and ecological resources precious to communities such as the Latino community can be protected in a collaborative and transparent manner. It is also a lesson in how continued advocacy on systemic issues are important to protect the places that communities love.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND ADVOCATES

When supporting our coastal and marine communities and ecosystems, we have the opportunity to advocate for federal designations in inclusive and culturally relevant ways that uplift our communities and break down barriers to access while building resilient coasts, strong livelihoods, and a healthy environment.

HOLISTIC OCEAN, COASTAL, AND CLIMATE PROTECTIONS

The threats to the protected areas in the case studies above show that it is not enough to protect sites of cultural, historical, and biological importance. While the sites themselves are protected to varying degrees from threats such as overfishing, nutrient pollution, oil and gas exploration, coastal development, and more, they have, in many cases, become shrinking oases of conservation, threatened on all sides by those same forces. This shows the need to create buffer zones, wildlife corridors, and other mechanisms to ensure that marine protected areas can continue to serve their purpose.

As climate change progresses, so too will sea level rise, ocean acidification,

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CLIMATE
CHANGE IMPACTS AND SOLUTIONS
THAT SERVE LATINO COMMUNITIES



Hispanic Access Foundation's
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and extreme weather causing storm surges and other damaging impacts to these ecosystems. For this reason, in order to protect these areas and future ones, we must also enact a just climate transition. Within the next 10-15 years, we must phase out the use of coal, oil, and gas and transition U.S. energy sources to 100% renewable energy, e.g. solar and wind, while implementing a [just transition](#) for communities dependent on fossil fuel jobs. Furthermore, we must invest in creating and restoring [natural areas that will provide resilience](#) to flooding and sea-level rise, such as wetlands, floodplains, and urban green spaces.

ACCESS TO COASTAL AND MARINE AREAS



One major barrier facing Latinos across the U.S. is a lack of access to natural areas and public lands, including marine and coastal areas. For example, only 10 percent of the U.S. coast and Great Lakes is covered by strong legal protections for public access.⁵³ This is the result of structural inequities rooted in white supremacy, land dispossession and other oppressive forces within the U.S., which has led to restrictive coastal access policies across and via private property and public lands, including prohibitive parking, privatization of beaches, and seizure of land. Even when access is open, barriers continue to exist, including high parking costs, lack of overnight accommodations, limited public transportation options, or restrictive uses that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.⁵⁴ As the federal government continues to prioritize environmental and climate justice, these federal designations have the

opportunity to address these access barriers. As such, we recommend that:

- A requirement be established that any coastal projects that use federal funds provide coastal access.
- Create a federal Equitable Coastal Access Advisory Group.
- Bring resources to parks and nature areas that serve minoritized communities, ensuring accessibility for the disabled.
- Protect and conserve more coastal and marine areas that maintain public access, are culturally relevant, and accessible to our communities.
- New and existing marine and coastal designations ensure access to the natural resources within the designations for livelihoods, making sure not to remove opportunities from the Latino community who rely on fishing and other livelihoods strongly tied to coastal and marine environments.
- Increase public access through public transit, carpooling, bicycle, and walk access, and recreational opportunities at beaches, coastal and marine parks and monuments.⁵⁵
- Ensure parks meet the needs of local communities in terms of language, programming, and accessibility, using community consultation and engagement.
- Monuments and names of public spaces should not project white supremacy, oppression, or intimidation.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE IMPORTANCE OF NATURE ACCESS, PLEASE READ HISPANIC ACCESS'



[10 Ways Access to Nature Can Bolster Biodiversity, Communities, and Climate](#)

ACCESSIBLE DESIGNATION PROCESSES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The designation process of many federal land protection designations are complex and difficult to understand. Furthermore, they are often structured so that only those with the time and resources to navigate the process, or who own land, are able to participate. Although federal agencies are increasing the transparency around their designation process, accessibility and clarity vary across agencies and designations. Therefore, there is still a lot of work to be done to increase participation. As such, we recommend:

- The designation process integrate Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous sovereignty, and co-stewardship models into nature management and decision-making.
- Design less complex and time consuming processes for designations.
- Incorporate more opportunities for community leadership, including:
 - Reevaluating and updating designation criteria.
 - Providing institutional support in the form of community liaisons at the state and local levels to facilitate and sustain community relationships with minoritized communities through the nomination process.
 - Creation of a permanent committee or advisory group that sustains efforts to integrate equity, justice, diversity, and inclusion frameworks into the administration and creation of these designations.
 - Provide adequate alternatives to the federal designation process that promote and enable communities to protect places of significance, directly combating gentrification and other threats brought about from re-development and land acquisition.
 - Develop a professional pipeline to the agencies responsible for administering these designations for individuals from minoritized communities to obtain career opportunities that lead to decision-making roles.
 - Establishes co-management programs for federally protected areas and/or the conservation management and cultural preservation efforts with Latino, Black, Indigenous, queer, and other minoritized and frontline communities.
- Implement a community review process for new and existing designations that:

TIPS FOR DESIGNATION OF LATINO HERITAGE SITES

For inclusive designation for Latino heritage sites, Hispanic Access Foundation has established the following recommendations to achieve inclusive designations for Latino heritage sites. [Check out the full report here!](#)

- Update the Criteria for Evaluation into the National Register of Historic Places.
- Provide institutional support in the form of community liaisons at the state level to facilitate and sustain community relationships with minoritized communities through the nomination process.
- Develop a permanent committee or advisory group that sustains efforts to integrate Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion frameworks into Historic Preservation nominations and designations.
- Provide solutions outside of the National Register process that promote and enable communities to protect places of significance, directly combating gentrification and other threats brought about from re-development.
- Develop a professional pipeline in Historic Preservation for individuals from minoritized communities to obtain career opportunities that lead to decision-making roles.
- Develop a theme study that specifically focuses on the U.S. Northeast and the Latino diaspora's histories in the region.⁵⁶

- Allows for evaluations around whose histories, narratives, cultures, and current uses these designations are protecting and serving.
- Provides opportunities to revise the narratives around these designations to offer more complete histories of place.

SUPPORTIVE LAWS AND FUNDING

The agencies and partners who oversee these designations are dependent on federal funds appropriated by the U.S. Congress to adequately administer, restore, protect, monitor, and research these ecosystems, monuments, wildlife, and historic places in conjunction with the designation’s mission and goals. As such, it is critical that adequate funding is provided to these agencies and their partners. Furthermore, supportive laws and Executive Orders are fundamental to administering existing and creating new designations that are culturally relevant, sensitive, accessible, and advance racial, environmental, and climate justice. As such, we recommend:

- Investment in park creation, ongoing maintenance, and restoration of degraded lands and waters, through expanding urban and wildlife refuges, National Monuments, and other protected public lands ,waters, and ocean designations.
- Funding transparency that allows local communities and their leaders to understand how funds are being allocated and utilized and ensure that the funds are advancing racial, climate, and environmental justice, and inclusive and liberatory narratives.
- Phasing out oil and gas development on public lands and waters, restoring degraded areas, plugging old wells, and ensuring a just transition for workers and communities from fossil fuels to renewable energy.
- Centering priorities and concentrating resources where they are needed most - in environmental justice, low-income, queer, immigrant, and communities of color.⁵⁷
- Supporting and advocating for recent federal initiatives and bills. President Biden’s America the Beautiful Initiative (“30x30”) and recent bills including the 2023 Farm Bill, the Inflation Reduction Act, Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (“Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill”) provide opportunities to reach these goals with input, advocacy, and support from the community to ensure these important areas of focus are upheld during implementation.
 - The America the Beautiful initiative, which aims to conserve 30% of land and water across the U.S. and its territories by 2030, identifies



eight key principles as part of this goal, including inclusivity, conservation for the benefits of all, support for locally based solutions, pursuit for economic development, respect to tribal sovereignty, reliance on science, and guidance from Indigenous communities.⁵⁸

- ◇ The aims of 30x30 is supported by 83% of Latino voters in the West, and 89% in the Chesapeake region.
- For the 2023 Farm Bill, Hispanic Access Foundation has identified the following recommendations and priorities which, if incorporated would lead to another bill to support Latino, Black, queer, Indigenous and other minoritized communities and the coastal and marine environments we rely on:
 - ◇ Addressing racial justice;
 - ◇ Supporting local agriculture and food system within U.S. territories, many of which are island communities and therefore highly connected to coasts and the marine environment; and
 - ◇ Protecting farm worker health and safety, which the Elkhorn Slough case study demonstrated has direct links to coastal health and environmental justice.
- The Inflation Reduction Act, which allocated \$2.6 billion for coastal resilience projects, provides unprecedented funding with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make coasts and beaches more equitable through the recommendations identified above as well as other efforts.
- Lastly, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill also provides funding for:
 - ◇ Resiliency, including funding for coastal resiliency, ecosystem restoration, and weatherization;
 - ◇ Public transit; and
 - ◇ Water infrastructure.⁵⁹

**TO LEARN HOW TO GET INVOLVED AND
ADVOCATE FOR THESE POLICIES,
PLEASE READ**



[Hispanic Access Foundation's
Latino Advocacy Toolkit 2023](#)





CONCLUSION

Marine and coastal areas are central to many Latino communities who live near, rely on, are impacted by, and connected to, the ocean. However, historical and contemporary inequities and oppression have led to disruptions to our relationships with our coasts and ocean, through pollution, natural disasters, ecosystem degradation, resource depletion, and exclusionary narratives of place.

Federal designations that help protect coastal and marine areas provide opportunities for Latino, Indigenous, Black, queer, and other minoritized communities to address the threats facing coastal communities that center their needs, experiences, and cultures and in doing so, address environmental, climate, and racial justice.

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ABOUT US

Hispanic Access Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that connects Latinos with partners and opportunities improving lives and creating an equitable society. Our vision is that all Hispanics throughout the U.S. enjoy good physical health, a healthy natural environment, a quality education, economic success and civic engagement in their communities with the sum improving the future of America. For more information, visit www.hispanicaccess.org.

Hispanic Access Foundation was actively involved in elevating the Latino community's voice around the Browns Canyon, San Gabriel Mountains, Boulder-White Clouds, Sand to Snow, Mojave Trails, Castle Mountains National Monument, and Castner Range National Monument efforts. Additionally, Hispanic Access has launched the initiatives Por la Creacion Faith Based Alliance, which unites Latino faith leaders around the protection of God's creation and creating tomorrow's environmental stewards, and Latino Conservation Week, which includes dozens of conservation and outdoor-related events across the country.



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