Overview:

The Channel Islands—sometimes called the Galapagos of North America—are known for their great beauty, rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and recreational opportunities. In 1980, in recognition of the islands' importance, the United States Congress established a national park encompassing 5 of California's Channel Islands (Santa Barbara, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel Islands) and waters within 1 nautical mile of the islands. In the same year, Congress declared a national marine sanctuary around each of these islands, including waters up to 6 nautical miles offshore.

Approximately 60,000 people visit the Channel Islands each year for aquatic recreation such as fishing, sailing, kayaking, wildlife watching, surfing, and diving. Another 30,000 people visit the islands for hiking, camping, and sightseeing. Dozens of commercial fishing boats based in Santa Barbara, Ventura, Oxnard, and other ports go to the Channel Islands to catch squid, spiny lobster, sea urchin, rockfish, crab, sheephead, flatfish, and sea cucumber, among other species.

In the past few decades, advances in fishing technology and the rising number of fishermen, in conjunction with changing ocean conditions and diseases, have contributed to declines in some marine fishes and invertebrates at the Channel Islands. In 1998, citizens from Santa Barbara and Ventura proposed establishment of no-take marine reserves at the Channel Islands, beginning a 4-year process of public meetings, discussions, and scientific analyses. In 2003, the California Fish and Game Commission designated a network of marine protected areas (MPAs) in state waters around the northern Channel Islands. In 2006 and 2007, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) extended the MPAs into the national marine sanctuary's deeper, federal waters.

To determine if the MPAs are protecting marine species and habitats, scientists are monitoring ecological changes. They are studying changes in habitats; abundance and size of species of interest; the ocean food web and ecosystem; and movement of fish and invertebrates from MPAs to surrounding waters. Additionally, scientists are monitoring human activities such as commercial and recreational fisheries, and compliance with MPA regulations.

This booklet describes some results from the first 5 years of monitoring the Channel Islands MPAs. Although 5 years is not long enough to determine if the MPAs will accomplish all of their goals, this booklet offers a glimpse of the changes that are beginning to take place and illustrates the types of information that will eventually be used to assess the MPAs' effectiveness.

monitoring MPAs