



Marine Resources

NEARSHORE ECOLOGY PROGRAM

2025 Year in Review



INTRODUCING THE NEARSHORE ECOLOGY PROGRAM

In 2025, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) reorganized the Marine Reserves Program and the Marine Habitat Project under joint leadership with the creation of the Nearshore Ecology Program. This restructuring brings together ODFW efforts focused on marine conservation and habitat research.

With goals focused on conservation, research, and communities, the Marine Reserves team conducts ecological monitoring at the reserves and comparison sites; human dimensions research to understand how people use, relate to, and value Oregon's marine reserves; and communications and outreach. The Marine Habitat team focuses on understanding habitats broadly, researching seafloor communities, and contributing to management decisions and policy development that supports sustainability and conservation.

Together, these teams enable the program to generate a more holistic view of nearshore and estuarine resources in Oregon's five marine reserves and beyond.

The 2025 Nearshore Ecology Program Year in Review highlights some of the key research activities, findings, and community outreach events from the last year and opportunities to learn more and get involved.



Scott Groth

The Nearshore Ecology Program conducts research, guides management and policy decisions, and leads outreach and engagement efforts to conserve and better understand Oregon's ocean, habitats, and wildlife, like the quillback rockfish and anemones pictured above.

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WHO WE ARE



Dr. Maria Zapetis*
Nearshore Ecology
Program Leader



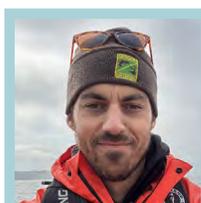
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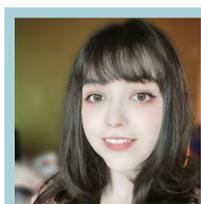
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Marine Habitat

Marine Reserves



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Thank you to Sam Cheplick (Sea Grant Natural Resource Policy Fellow), Dr. Sarah Klain (Human Dimensions Project Leader), and Sarah Sampson* (Seasonal Ecological Research Assistant) for their contributions to the Marine Reserves team in 2025!

** Joined the team in 2025*

HOW WE WORK

Nearshore Ecology Program

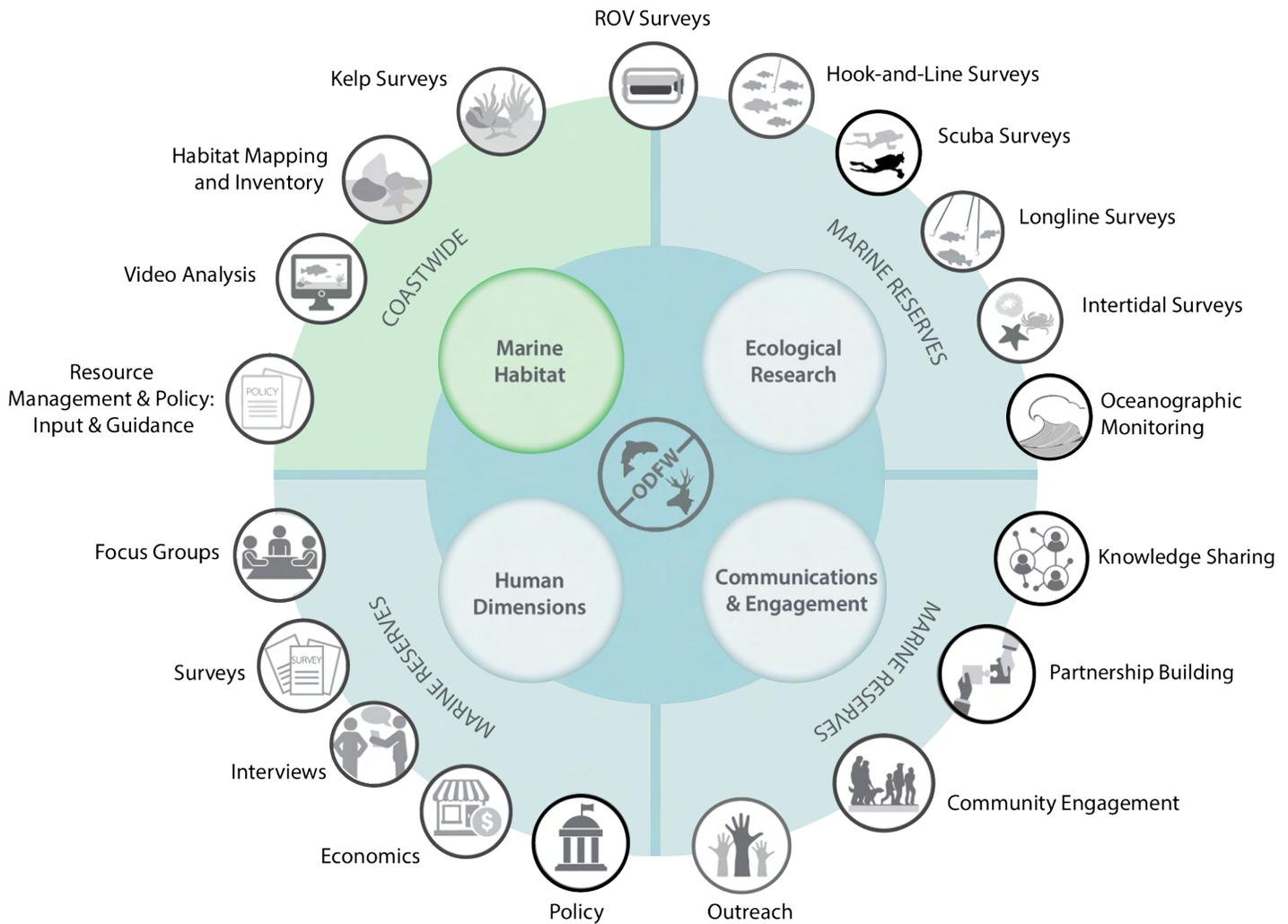
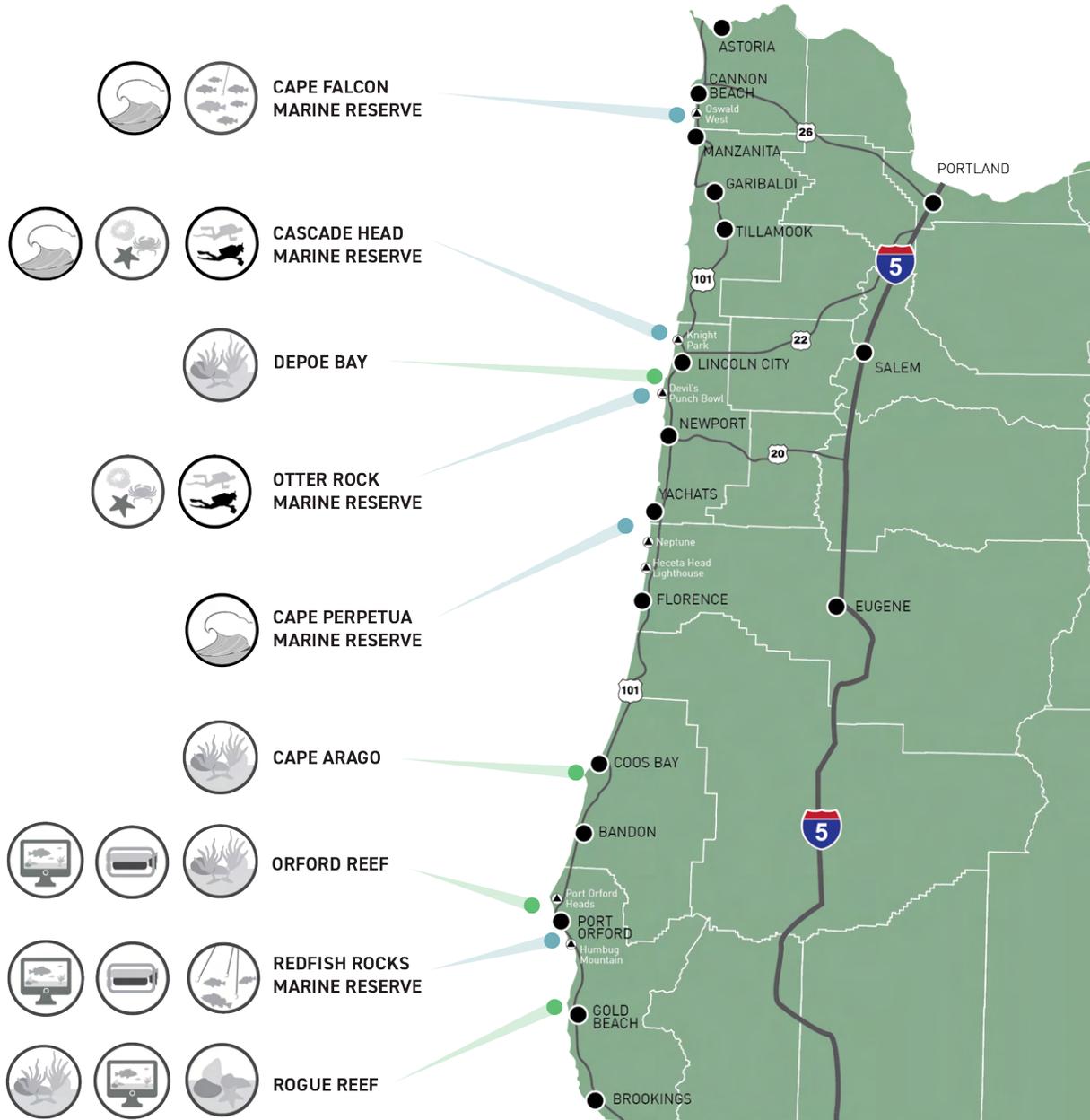


Figure 1. This graphic depicts the primary methods used by the Nearshore Ecology Program and the Marine Habitat and Marine Reserves teams' respective areas of focus.

WHERE OUR FIELDWORK FOCUSED IN 2025

The map below highlights the **primary locations where the Nearshore Ecology Program’s ecological fieldwork and analysis took place in 2025**. Read more about some of the work completed at these sites by the **Marine Reserves** team on pages 6 - 11 and the **Marine Habitat** team on pages 12 - 14.

The Oregon Coast is central to the Nearshore Ecology Program’s work, but the program’s reach extends more broadly. Marine Habitat staff play a crucial role in informing management, policy, and project decisions at the coastal, state, and federal levels. In 2025, the Marine Reserves team’s communications, outreach, and engagement efforts spanned the Oregon Coast, the Willamette Valley, and the Umpqua Valley.



The map focuses on locations referenced in the newsletter and does not depict all of the program’s collaborative research efforts. Refer to the graphic on page 3 for a description of the icons.

2025 NEARSHORE ECOLOGY PROGRAM BY THE NUMBERS

1 **New Program** combining the Marine Reserves Program and Marine Habitat Project

4 New Fulltime Staff Hired 

7 Human Dimensions Publications and Reports 

8 Vessel Contracts Totaling **\$152,358** 

28 Student Collaborators on Research Projects 

36 Outreach Events Reached Over **2,100** People 

\$51,575 to Community-Based Programs 

36 Marine Reserve Survey Days



Intertidal

2 Days at Cascade Head
2 Days at Otter Rock



SCUBA

4 Days at Cascade Head
4 Days at Otter Rock



ROV

7 Days at Redfish Rocks



Hook-and-Line

8 Days at Cape Falcon



Longline & Hook-and-Line

9 Days at Redfish Rocks



88 Volunteers

644 Volunteer Hours

52km² New Detailed Seafloor Maps Created at Rogue Reef 

7,996 Invertebrates Counted in Seafloor Videos 

Marine Reserves

CAPE FALCON MARINE RESERVE

CURRENT TRENDS IN FISH ABUNDANCES SUPPORT EXPECTATIONS

Each year, the Marine Reserves team monitors two marine reserves with hook-and-line surveys. In 2025, we surveyed Cape Falcon and Redfish Rocks. These surveys are integral to meeting legislative mandates and understanding changes in fish biodiversity, abundance, and size in the reserves and comparison areas. Hook-and-line trips are also an important mechanism for community engagement. All fishing is done by volunteer anglers.

Based on historical fishing pressure and habitat quality, we have different expectations of change for each of Oregon's reserves. The area within the Cape Falcon Marine Reserve had relatively low groundfish fishing pressure before closure due to known low fish abundance and limited rocky reef habitat. Thus, minimal changes to fish communities are expected after the reserve implementation in 2016. Current data reflect these expectations. The average catch rate (number of fish caught per hour of fishing) of all fish caught at the reserve post-closure is not significantly different from the catch before the closure (Fig. 2). Fish catch in the reserves in recent years matches that of the comparison areas, indicating no changes related to marine reserve protections (Fig. 2). We will continue to evaluate rates of change in the rocky reef marine communities.

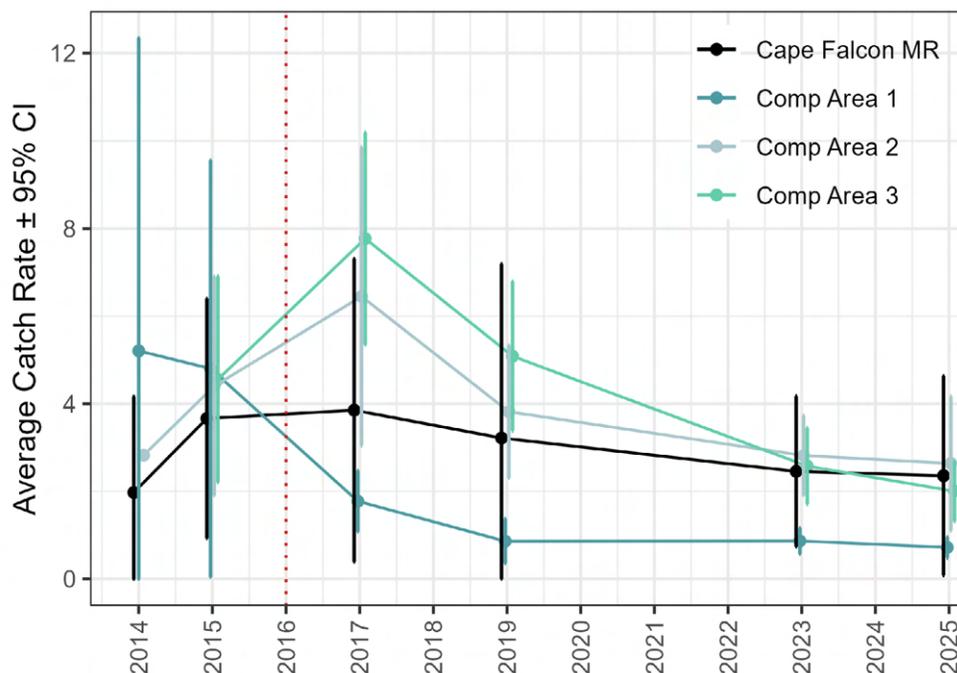


Figure 2. Average hook-and-line survey catch rate (fish caught per hour) with 95% confidence interval (CI) of all fish caught at the Cape Falcon Marine Reserve and its comparison areas. The red dashed line indicates the first year of marine reserve implementation at Cape Falcon (2016).

CAPE FALCON COMMUNITY MEETING IMPROVES REGULATORY CLARITY

In partnership with ODFW, the North Coast Land Conservancy hosted a meeting in September for communities surrounding the reserve to learn about the science and research underway in the Cape Falcon Marine Reserve and the regulations in place to protect it. Community members in attendance expressed a need for clearer communication of the harvest restrictions. ODFW clarified the language used to describe the Cape Falcon restrictions in the 2026 Oregon Sport Fishing Regulations in response to this concern.



A Red Irish Lord caught during the 2025 Cape Falcon hook-and-line surveys.

Marine Reserves

CASCADE HEAD MARINE RESERVE

OCHRE SEA STAR DENSITY INCREASING AFTER DISEASE OUTBREAK

Annual intertidal sea star surveys at the Cascade Head Marine Reserve track abundance and diversity as part of a larger study with our collaborators at Oregon State University's Munge Lubchenco Lab. Sea star wasting disease (SSWD) greatly decreased sea star populations along the Oregon Coast in 2014, prompting monitoring of sea stars at the Cascade Head Marine Reserve in 2015. SSWD impacted many sea star species, including the ochre sea star (*Pisaster ochraceus*) and six-rayed sea star (*Leptasterias hexactis*). Since 2016, ochre sea stars at the Cascade Head Marine Reserve appear to be increasing in density (Fig. 3). This indicates a rebound from the impacts of SSWD. Six-rayed stars were abundant in 2015, then rare thereafter (Fig. 3). This decline may be due to SSWD, but high variability makes this relationship unclear. ODFW and the Munge Lubchenco Lab will continue to monitor sea star populations. Long-term monitoring of sea star populations in marine reserves can provide a better understanding of their resilience to disease outbreaks.



Ochre sea star (left) and six-rayed sea star (right)

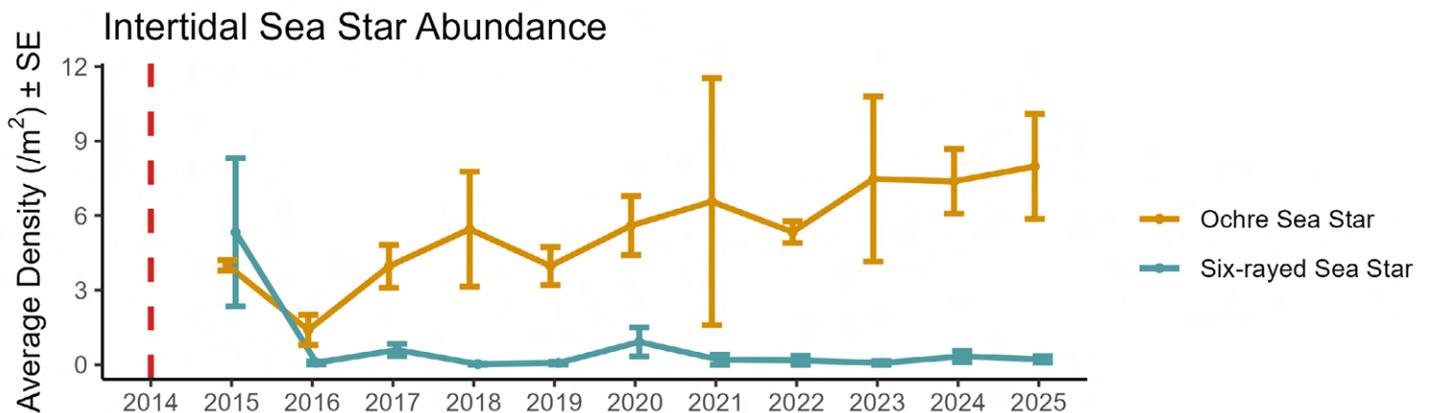


Figure 3. The average density (number/m² ± standard error (SE)) of sea stars over time at the Cascade Head Marine Reserve. The dashed line in 2014 indicates the outbreak of sea star wasting disease.



MARINE RESERVES JOURNAL VIDEO SERIES HIGHLIGHTS CASCADE HEAD

With support from ODFW, the Cascade Head Biosphere Collaborative created the Marine Reserves Journal video series highlighting the wonderful wildlife that call the Cascade Head Marine Reserve home and the work underway to support conservation and research of the reserve. Keep up with the series on the [ODFW Marine Reserves Youtube](#) and [ODFW Marine Instagram](#) accounts.

Marine Reserves

OTTER ROCK MARINE RESERVE

ADAPTING SCUBA SURVEYS TO STRENGTHEN DATASETS

Our SCUBA diving surveys are run in collaboration with the Oregon Coast Aquarium and Oregon State University's scientific diving programs. These surveys allow us to gather information on the biodiversity and abundance of invertebrates living on rocky habitats. Starting in 2023, our SCUBA survey design was adapted from a random sampling protocol to permanent index sites, where we survey the same spots every time we monitor a reserve. The index site approach improves our ability to understand changes in biodiversity. This modification is an example of adaptive management based on survey evaluation. The 2025 species composition graph (Fig. 4) is from the new index site approach and highlights that purple and red sea urchins make up a smaller portion of total invertebrates at the Otter Rock Marine Reserve, compared to the Cape Foulweather Comparison Area (Fig. 4).

Invertebrates like sea urchins perform essential ecosystem functions. Tracking changes in invertebrate populations over time helps us understand the health of our nearshore ecosystems.

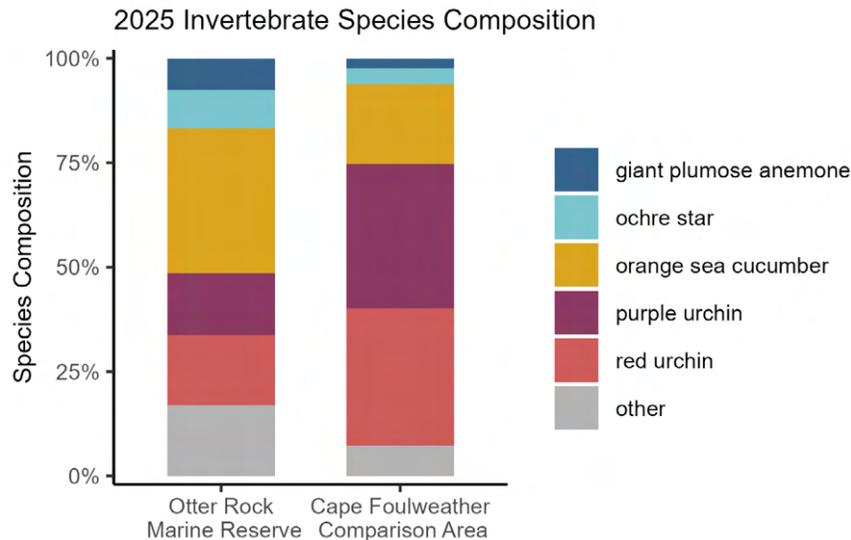


Figure 4. Species composition of invertebrates from 2025 permanent index site SCUBA surveys at the Otter Rock Marine Reserve and the Cape Foulweather Comparison Area.

AUGMENTED REALITY PROVIDES A DIGITAL DEEP DIVE BENEATH OTTER ROCK

The Marine Reserves Human Dimensions team and Friends of Otter Rock Marine Reserve collaborated with the Oregon Reality Lab to create an augmented reality dive into Otter Rock Marine Reserve. A team of graduate students created a smartphone and Snap Smart Spectacle experience for visitors to learn more about the habitats and species of Otter Rock. Graduate students conducted user experience interviews and surveys during and after the design process. Scan the QR code to learn more and dive beneath the surface!



[oregonmarine
reserves.com/
otterrock-ar](https://oregonmarinereserves.com/otterrock-ar)

UNDERSTANDING COASTAL PROTECTIONS WITH SEVEN CAPES BIRD ALLIANCE

In July, the ODFW Marine Reserves team participated in the Seven Capes Bird Alliance's guided walk along Otter Crest Loop. Thirty participants learned about ongoing research at the Otter Rock Marine Reserve, how the National Wildlife Refuge system protects nesting seabirds, and the goals of the recently designated Cape Foulweather Complex Marine Conservation Area. The ODFW team shared insights on the role of the marine reserves in the mosaic of protections along Oregon's coast.



Otter Rock Marine Reserve

Marine Reserves

CAPE PERPETUA MARINE RESERVE



Cape Perpetua Collaborative

Community-crafted tidepool mosaic at the Cape Perpetua Visitors Center.

COMMUNITY NIGHTS PROMOTE ART, SCIENCE, AND STEWARDSHIP

ODFW funded a series of events for the Cape Perpetua Collaborative that engaged community members with the marine reserve through art, science, and storytelling. Led by local glass artist Joanne Daschel, 45 people contributed to the creation of the tidepool mosaic (pictured) that now hangs at the Cape Perpetua Visitors Center.

MONITORING OCEAN CONDITIONS TO UNDERSTAND CHANGE

Jack Barth, Francis Chan, and Brian VerWey (Oregon State University)

During the summer of 2025, Oregon State University continued oceanographic monitoring in the Cape Perpetua Marine Reserve in partnership with ODFW. Since 2009, scientists have deployed sensors each summer to track changes in ocean conditions both inside and outside the marine reserve. These sensors measure temperature, salinity, chlorophyll fluorescence, and dissolved oxygen near the seafloor in the marine reserve at a depth of 15 meters (SH-15) and another location farther offshore at a depth of 70 meters (SH-70).

In 2025, winds that drive coastal upwelling began in April and were especially strong, resulting in the second-highest cumulative upwelling in the last decade. This upwelling brought cold, salty, nutrient-rich, but oxygen-poor water toward the surface close to shore. Low oxygen (hypoxia) adversely impacts marine life, and severe hypoxia causes increased stress. Historically, dissolved oxygen levels at SH-15 oscillate between periods of very low and high oxygen, depending on wind conditions. Upwelling caused by south-moving winds drives low-oxygen conditions, while high-oxygen conditions occur when winds relax or move north, bringing more oxygenated waters to the seafloor. Both SH-15 and SH-70 showed extended periods of hypoxia relatively early in the upwelling season (June) compared with other years, likely due to the strong, early-season, upwelling-favorable winds (Fig. 5). Both reached severe hypoxia in July before hypoxia was relieved in August (SH-15) and September (SH-70) (Fig. 5). These long-term observations are essential for understanding changing ocean conditions, anticipating risks to marine life, and supporting informed management of Oregon's coastal ecosystems.

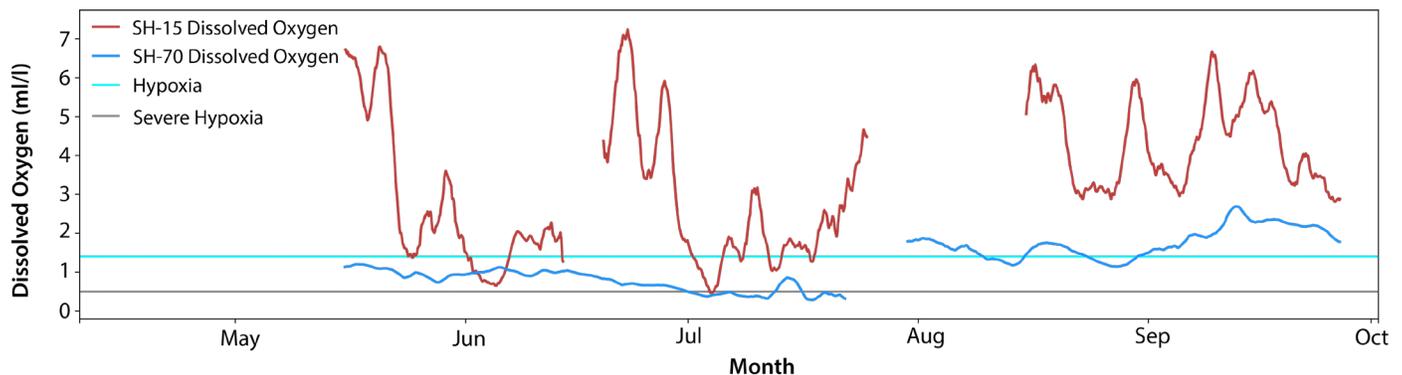


Figure 5: 2025 time series of dissolved oxygen in milliliters per liter (ml/l) measured near the seafloor at a depth of 15 m (SH-15, red curve) and farther offshore at a depth of 70 m (SH-70, blue curve). The values for hypoxia (1.4 ml/l) and severe hypoxia (0.5 ml/l) are indicated by cyan and black horizontal lines, respectively.

Marine Reserves

REDFISH ROCKS MARINE RESERVE

RECENT YEARS SHOW AN INCREASE IN TOTAL FISH CATCH FROM HOOK-AND-LINE

In 2025, Redfish Rocks was one of two reserves monitored with hook-and-line surveys. Based on historical fishing pressure and habitat quality, we have different expectations of change for each reserve. Our expectation to see change due to reserve protections at Redfish Rocks is relatively high due to its larger size, prior high fishing pressure, and prominent rocky reef. Historically, the catch rate (number of fish caught per hour) of all fish caught at the Redfish Rocks areas has shown variability. However, we have observed a marked increase in catch rates at the reserve and both comparison areas in recent years (Fig. 6). This increase in catch rates may be linked to larger-scale drivers such as oceanographic changes and new fish recruitment, or potentially marine reserve protections. Future analyses may provide further insights into the drivers causing this increase.

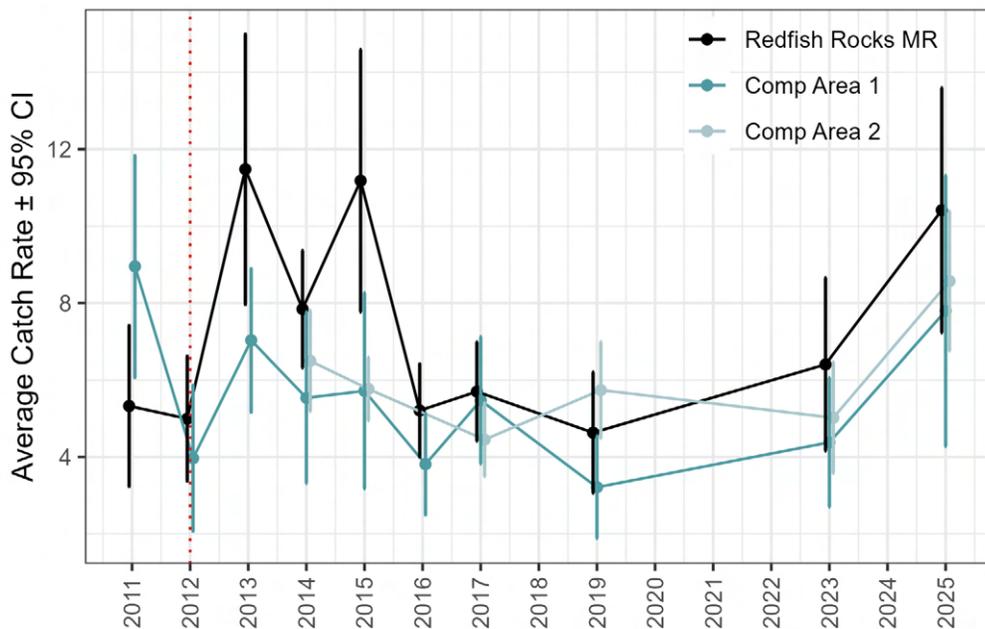


Figure 6. Average catch rate with 95% confidence interval (CI) of all fish caught at the Redfish Rocks Marine Reserve and its comparison areas. Red dashed line indicates the first year of marine reserve implementation (2012).

ECONOMIC ANALYSIS REVEALS JOB AND INCOME GENERATION FROM REDFISH ROCKS MARINE RESERVE

A case study conducted by the Marine Reserves Human Dimensions team in collaboration with Sea & Shore Solutions highlights the positive economic impact of tourism and science within Redfish Rocks Marine Reserve. Using an input-output model, the study found a total economic impact of approximately \$982,000 and 20 jobs at the county, coast, and state levels from 2022-2024. These findings help us understand the broader value of marine reserves beyond their ecological benefits, illustrating how money makes its way to businesses and household incomes as a result of marine reserve related activities. Scan the QR code to view the report.



[Redfish Rocks Economic Contributions Report](#)



Longline and hook-and-line surveys at Redfish Rocks are made possible by ongoing collaborations with fishers.

Marine Reserves

BEYOND BOUNDARIES: PROJECTS ACROSS MARINE RESERVES

MARINE RESERVES EXHIBIT HIGHER SPECIES BIODIVERSITY THAN COMPARISON AREAS

Oregon's marine reserves were established with three main goals, including conserving biodiversity. After 16 years of dedicated monitoring in reserves and nearby comparison areas that are open to fishing, we can now explore patterns in biodiversity across these sites.

We recently integrated data from multiple survey methods—including SCUBA, remotely operated vehicle (ROV), hook-and-line, longline, and intertidal surveys—to assess diversity and community structure. Marine reserves exhibit higher species biodiversity than nearby comparison areas when data are combined across all sites and years (see Fig. 7). This exploration shows that there is evidence that marine reserves are supporting areas of higher biodiversity, but the story is more complicated if we look at individual surveys and sites. Stay tuned for future updates.

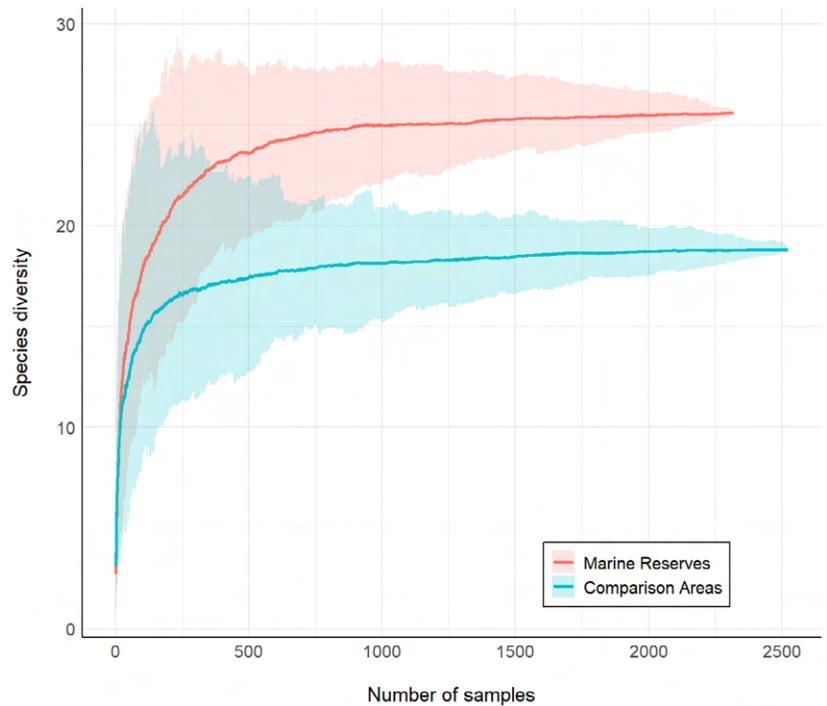


Figure 7. The figure depicts species diversity increases with sampling effort and is higher in Oregon's marine reserves (red) than in nearby comparison areas (blue). The shaded areas show the variation in data (95% confidence interval).

COMMUNITY INPUT INFORMS WELL-BEING METRICS LINKED TO MARINE RESERVES

Understanding how coastal communities use, value, and interact with the ocean is crucial to our mission of balancing conservation outcomes with human well-being. To better measure this, the Human Dimensions research team partnered with graduate students from the University of California, Davis's Environmental Policy Clinic. The *Metrics that Matter* project hosted a series of community meetings along the Oregon coast in the Spring of 2025. The goal of the meetings was to narrow down a set of well-being indicators that researchers can measure to gauge how marine reserves might be impacting human health, happiness, and more. 80 community members participated across five sites and shared their own ideas on how their well-being connects back to the ocean. The UC Davis students then analyzed these data to narrow down the most relevant variables across the board. The community-identified indicators will inform ODFW's long-term human dimensions monitoring plan, and a subset will be incorporated into a pilot survey to be launched in 2026. Scan the QR code to read the report.



[Metrics That Matter:
Well-Being Indicators
Report](#)

Marine Habitat

PROJECTS IN OREGON'S NEARSHORE AND BEYOND



Remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) are a core monitoring tool to understand Oregon's nearshore resources in marine reserves and beyond.

ROVING THE SEAFLOOR

The Marine Habitat team gathers data along Oregon's coast to better understand fish, invertebrate, and kelp communities in rocky habitats and guide the management of ocean resources. Remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) are an important tool to complete this work in waters deeper than SCUBA divers can explore. ROVs carry video cameras to record along fixed paths on the seafloor called transects. Historically, the program has used a small BlueROV for shallow areas like those around kelp forests and a larger Phantom ROV (affectionately called the SeaCow) for deeper, offshore surveys. The ROV is also one of the core tools used to monitor Oregon's marine reserves, and in 2025, seven days of ROV surveys were completed at Redfish Rocks.

INFORMING POLICY AND MANAGEMENT TO CONSERVE OREGON'S MARINE RESOURCES

Marine Habitat Project staff coordinate across ODFW programs and with state and federal agency partners to inform management programs, policies, and proposed projects, ensuring actions are consistent with ODFW's mission and authorities to protect Oregon's fish, wildlife, and habitat resources. Current and emerging ocean uses exert a range of pressures on marine resources in state and federal waters, impacting ecological resources and access to areas important to Oregon's coastal communities and economies. Large-scale activities include offshore energy development, mineral extraction, seafloor cables, aquaculture, dredge material disposal, port expansion, and effluent discharges. These activities can damage habitats, degrade water quality, create acoustic and electromagnetic disturbance, displace fish and wildlife, and introduce invasive species.

Federal and state regulatory processes enable ODFW's Marine Resources Program to inform or guide proposed actions. For example, in 2025, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) initiated a review of its Nationwide Permits (NWPs),

which pre-authorize 57 categories of activities in U.S. waters. Most relevant to Oregon's marine and coastal waters are navigation, dredging, discharges, hydropower, utility/telecom lines, oil/gas pipelines, bank stabilization, stream and wetland restoration, living shorelines, fish passage, and aquaculture. In response to the USACE's proposed permit modifications, Marine Habitat Project staff identified significant issues that would increase risks to resources and undermine state oversight. Together with DLCD's Coastal Zone Management Program and DEQ, Oregon provided a robust response with solutions to help protect Oregon's aquatic resources and habitats, enhance oversight, and align with Oregon's natural resource laws.



Marine Habitat staff work to protect Oregon's fish, wildlife, and habitats—like those supporting the black rockfish and kelp pictured above—from impacts of ocean development and coastal activities.

Marine Habitat

SEAFLOOR MAPPING OF NEARSHORE HABITATS AT THE ROGUE RIVER REEF COMPLEX

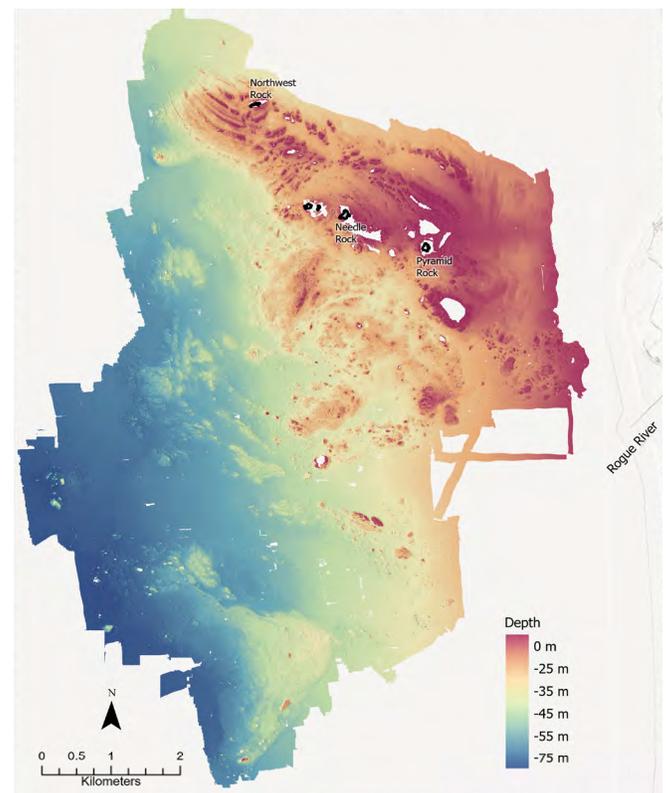
Understanding Oregon's nearshore ocean starts with detailed knowledge of its seafloor habitats and associated biological communities. In 2024 and 2025, Marine Habitat staff completed a high-resolution multibeam bathymetry survey of the last major rocky reef system in Oregon state waters that lacked high-quality depth data, the Rogue River Reef off Gold Beach. The Marine Habitat team collaborated with OSU Engineering professor Meagan Wengrove, leveraging \$181,000 in grant funding from the Oregon Ocean Science Trust. Marine Habitat Project Leader Scott Marion spent 9 survey days at sea aboard a charter vessel and 6 days piloting ODFW's vessel out of Gold Beach, covering over 52 km² at Rogue Reef and the nearby Breakers Reef. Video footage from over 50 remotely operated vehicle (ROV) dives documented the seafloor structure and the abundance of key species, including sea stars and sea urchins. This investment has produced the first detailed seafloor maps of these massive and intricate reef systems, finally enabling researchers to plan safe, efficient ecological surveys and opening the door for future habitat analyses and modeling in the region.



ODFW's Scott Marion pilots an ROV along the seafloor at Rogue Reef, steering the ROV over complex terrain using a real-time video feed and sensors on the vehicle.



The Rogue River Reef, home to the state's largest kelp bed, is one of the most complex regions along the coast to navigate.



The project produced seafloor maps showing detailed rocky reef features across a range of depths from intertidal to 75 m.

Marine Habitat

AERIAL SURVEYS DOCUMENT KELP DYNAMICS THROUGH TURBULENT TIMES

In 2025, the Marine Habitat Project synthesized kelp survey data collected in 2022 and 2024 into a [comprehensive report](#). The two aerial photographic surveys produced near-complete inventories of bull kelp beds along Oregon’s coastline. Funded through a competitive U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grant, this project was the first detailed look at changes to Oregon’s kelp after the marine heatwave that struck the west coast in 2014-2016. The heatwave decimated northern California’s bull kelp in a major ecosystem upheaval that included the arrival of a new wave of purple sea urchins and the loss of their major predator, the sunflower sea star. In 2022, the survey revealed a 70% reduction in floating kelp canopy south of Cape Arago since the last comparable survey in 2010. Kelp expansion in the Depoe Bay area drove a 26% increase between 2022 and 2024, but south coast regions continued to decline (Fig. 8).



Arlene Merems

Photo of kelp at Orford Reef taken during a survey in 1999. Kelp is no longer abundant here. This highlights the importance of continued monitoring of kelp and the factors that impact its abundance and distribution.

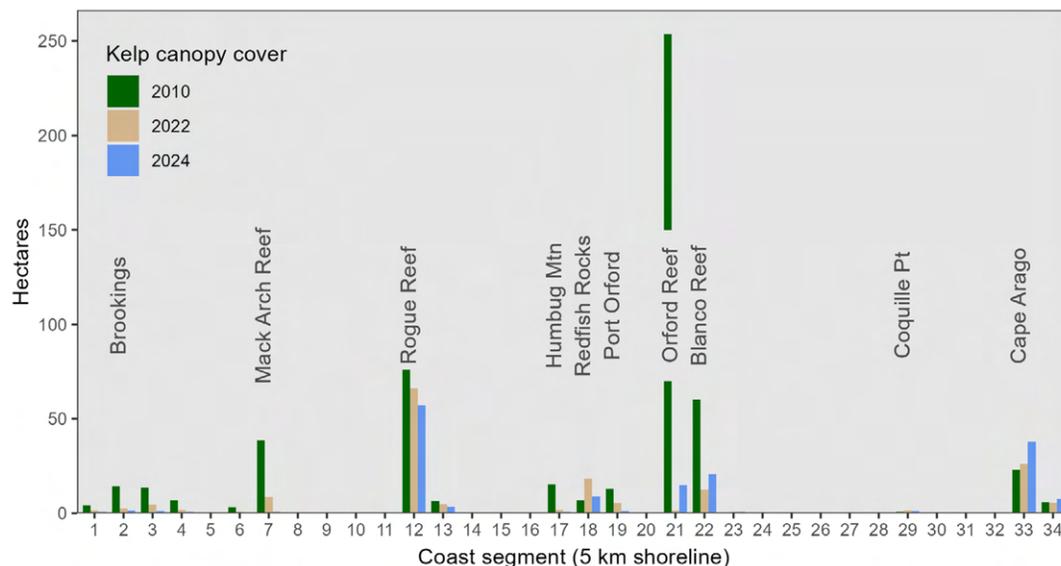


Figure 8. Kelp canopy area mapped in the 2010, 2022, and 2024 aerial photographic surveys, within the extent of the 2010 survey’s image coverage along the south coast.

After ODFW surveys of bull kelp in the mid-1990s documented insufficient biomass to support industrial harvest, the Department of State Lands (DSL) continued the moratorium on commercial kelp harvest, and ODFW’s nearshore focus turned elsewhere. However, recent changes in nearshore ecosystems highlight the importance of continuing to track kelp abundance and distribution. Monitoring changes in kelp will help ODFW understand and anticipate how these important fishery nursery grounds respond to changing ocean conditions, including changes in the abundance of grazing sea urchins and their predators. The Nearshore Ecology Program has identified a need to increase the frequency of kelp monitoring and continues to seek external support and collaboration to extend our monitoring efforts.

LEARN MORE AND GET INVOLVED IN 2026

SAVE THE DATES!

March 16: Learn more about these newsletter stories and more at the **first annual Nearshore Ecology Program meeting** from 1 - 5pm at the Gladys Valley Marine Studies Building in Newport. A networking reception will follow. More details at oregonmarinereserves.com/events/NEP26.

April 11: Join us at [Marine Science Day](#) to learn more about the Nearshore Ecology Program's work with fun, hands-on activities and demonstrations. This free, family-friendly event takes place from 10 am - 4pm at the Hatfield Marine Science Center in Newport.

VOLUNTEER WITH THE MARINE RESERVES ECOLOGICAL TEAM

The Marine Reserves Ecological team relies on over 100 volunteers annually to help collect long-term data. These opportunities include joining our hook-and-line fishing surveys as an angler to fish for science (fishing experience required) or as a biological assistant to help us record data. There are also opportunities each summer to stay on land and survey the intertidal as we collect data on sea stars and mussel beds. In 2026, Hook-and-line surveys will take place at Cascade Head and Cape Perpetua. Intertidal surveys will take place at Otter Rock and Cascade Head. Visit oregonmarinereserves.com/volunteer-opportunities for more information and fill out the required online form to sign up.

DIVE INTO MARINE RESERVES DATA

Did you know you can explore ecological data from Oregon's marine reserves with our interactive [ODFW Marine Reserves Data Dashboard](#)? With just a few simple drop-downs, you can dive into data collected by ODFW since 2011 across all five marine reserves and their comparison areas. The dashboard highlights information gathered through our core ecological monitoring tools. While the data are preliminary and intended for exploratory use, they offer insights into how each reserve is responding to protections over time.



Scan the QR code to access the ODFW Marine Reserves Data Dashboard.



Volunteer with us on hook-and-line and intertidal surveys.

EXPLORE MORE STORIES IN THE FISH ON! HOOK-AND-LINE NEWSLETTER

Read more about the data collected by the ODFW Marine Reserves Ecological team, including information about fish catch rates, sizes, oceanography, and how the Cape Falcon and Redfish Rocks Marine Reserves are unique in the [2025 Fish On! Hook-and-Line Volunteer Newsletter](#).



Scan the QR code to access the 2025 Fish On! Newsletter

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Marine Resources Program
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