

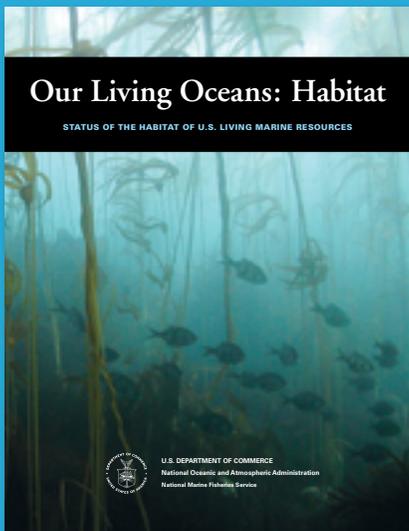


# NOAA FISHERIES

*“One of the greatest long-term threats to the viability of commercial and recreational fisheries is the continuing loss of marine, estuarine, and other aquatic habitats. Habitat considerations should receive increased attention for the conservation and management of fishery resources of the United States.”*

*- Magnuson-Stevens Act*

To download an electronic copy of the *OLO: Habitat*, visit: <http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/ecosystems/habitat/plans/olohabitat/index>



## Our Living Oceans: Habitat

### Southeast Region

The Southeast Region encompasses about 12% (1.34 million km<sup>2</sup> [391,000 nmi<sup>2</sup>]) of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). It includes nine inland states (Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Tennessee) and eight coastal states (North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas). It also includes the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Territory of the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Navassa Island (located in the Caribbean Wildlife Refuge).



Gray snapper in mangrove habitat, upper left. Coastal Louisiana wetlands, lower left. Yellowtail snapper in a coral reef habitat, right.

Habitat types in the Southeast Region include freshwater, estuarine, shallow marine (including barrier islands, coral reefs, and the Continental Shelf), and oceanic (including the Continental Slope, Loop Current, and Gulf Stream) habitats.

The Southeast Region is host to almost half (47%) of all freshwater and brackish water wetlands in the continental United States. As freshwater flows through watersheds, it passes through a series of wetland habitats that partially cleanse and slow the water's flow. These habitats are important economically, environmentally, and ecologically. While they vary in physical composition; they host a diverse array of fauna and flora.

Estuaries are found along the coast where freshwater from the terrestrial environment mixes with seawater from the ocean in a dynamic interplay between the tides, weather, and coastal topography. These highly variable habitats support some of the most productive and commercially valuable fishery species in the U. S.

Shallow marine habitats in the Southeast Region include a diverse set of habitats from the shallow coral reefs of Florida and the Caribbean, to the barrier islands that boarder the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, to the waters of the Continental Shelf. Thousands of species rely on these habitats for survival, growth, and reproduction, highlighting the importance of protecting and conserving these habitats.

Oceanic habitats in this region are dominated by two large oceanographic features: the Loop Current in the Gulf of Mexico, and the Gulf Stream in the Atlantic. Deep-sea corals are important features of oceanic habitats that provide critical habitats for numerous species of fish and invertebrates.

## Habitat Issues

On 20 April 2010, the Deepwater Horizon exploded and sank, giving rise to the largest oil spill in U.S. history. Millions of barrels of oil were released directly into the Gulf of Mexico and the response included the use of over 1 million gallons of chemical dispersants. Other issues for the Southeast Region habitats:

- Wetland loss due to sea-level rise, subsidence, and coastal development.
- Flood control structures that alter anadromous fish migrations.
- Coral reef loss due to bleaching, disease, and physical damage.
- Agricultural, industrial, and domestic discharge of nutrients and other pollutants that contaminate freshwater habitats and cause harmful algal blooms and hypoxia in offshore marine habitats.

## Habitat Needs

Research is particularly needed on species-habitat associations, habitat quality and habitat quantity. Managers need to know how species use habitat, the condition of habitats, and the best practices to conserve and restore critical habitats. Specific regional needs include:

- Characterizing and monitor habitat condition.
- Ecological studies for coral reefs and deep-sea corals.
- Delineating and mapping important habitats.
- Determining habitat requirements of early life stages (e.g. habitat type, quantity, and quality).
- Determining impacts of severe storms and sea level rise.
- Improving methods to determine efficacy of habitat restoration, and determine the economic and sociological benefits of conserving and restoring habitats.
- Improving understanding of transboundary biological and hydrological linkages.
- Improving understanding of the effects of underwater sound.
- Studying to determine human impacts on habitat and any subsequent effects on biology and behavior.

## Southeast Region Map



## Southeast Highlights

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) created the Final Habitat Plan for the South Atlantic Region. This document details essential fish habitat (EFH) requirements for Fishery Management Plans (FMP) for multiple fisheries managed by the Council. The habitat plan focuses on estuarine and inshore habitats of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and the Florida east coast, as well as adjacent and offshore marine habitats (e.g. coral, coral reefs, and live/hard bottom habitat, artificial reefs, Sargassum habitat, and the water column).

The SAFMC also developed the Fishery Ecosystem Plan for the South Atlantic Region. Building on the Habitat Plan, the Ecosystem Plan provides a more in-depth characterization of the overall South Atlantic ecosystem.

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council developed an Aquaculture FMP to maximize benefits to the Nation by establishing a regional permitting process to manage the development of an environmentally sound and economically sustainable offshore aquaculture industry in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

A long-term, multi-billion-dollar restoration program known as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) was initiated to restore the Everglades watershed to approximate pre-industrial conditions.

Florida's Biscayne Bay, located in the southeast of the state between Miami and the Everglades, and Puerto Rico's Northeast Reserves and Culebra Island were designated as two of NOAA's Habitat Focus Areas in 2015.

The Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico Watershed Nutrient Task Force, established in 1997, was established to reduce and control hypoxia in the Gulf of Mexico. Since this time, they have undertaken several actions and developed a plan to address, reduce, mitigate, and manage hypoxia in the Northern Gulf of Mexico as well as improve water quality in the Mississippi River Basin.