

May 30, 2025

Mr. Stan Rogers
Superintendent
Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary
10 Ocean Science Circle
Savannah, Georgia 31411

Dear Superintendent Rogers,

On behalf of our organizations and the more than three million members and online activists we collectively represent, thank you and the Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary staff and Advisory Council for your dedicated work to conserve this special portion of the Southeast's reefs and the marine wildlife supported by this dynamic live-bottom habitat. Because of your efforts, Gray's Reef is a place of beauty and rich biodiversity, offering divers, anglers, students, and scientists a wonderful place to enjoy and learn about our ocean.

But this remarkable nearshore area is only one piece of the Southeast's ocean treasures; the adjacent and globally important Blake Plateau reveals another, essential, part of the region's ocean story. As the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries begins its process to update the Gray's Reef sanctuary management plan, we have a prime opportunity to expand the sanctuary's boundaries, offering a more holistic look at the entire ocean system and safeguarding key parts of the nearby Blake Plateau.

Located roughly 80-200 miles offshore the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida, the Blake Plateau was identified in 2024 as host to the *world's* largest deep-sea coral province. Here ancient deep-sea coral mounds rise hundreds of feet off the ocean floor and shelter an array of marine life from deep-diving sperm whales to octopuses to sharks. Threatened and endangered sea turtles drift amid *Sargassum* seaweed meadows that dot the plateau's surface and hide and nourish juvenile turtles as well as provide aggregations of prey for billfish, tuna, and seafaring birds like the rare black-capped petrel. It is an underwater world steeped in maritime and cultural history, with spiritual significance for the Gullah/Geechee whose ancestors crossed its waters as part of the Middle Passage.

The plateau's deep-sea corals and Gulf Stream work together to process essential nutrients and pump them from the deep back up to the surface where they are transported throughout the South Atlantic Bight and up the east coast. These nutrients help sustain the region's fish populations and all who rely on them.

The Southeast is among the regions of the United States with the fewest marine protections, with less than one percent of its waters strongly protected. While still largely

pristine, without durable protections the Blake Plateau could be quickly destroyed by rapid ocean industrialization. Deep-sea corals grow only millimeters a year and are highly vulnerable to disturbance; the plateau's coral formations emerged over hundreds of thousands of years and if harmed would not return in any meaningful time period.

Folding Blake Plateau landmarks into an expanded sanctuary network would allow the public a fuller understanding of the scope and interconnectedness of the Southeast's ocean life and extend protections to a globally important live-bottom community, safeguarding a vulnerable deep-sea ecology that supports ocean life in the Southeast and along the entire east coast. Important features to incorporate in an updated sanctuary designation include:

- Stetson/Richardson Complex, home to the area's tallest deep-sea coral mounds.
- Central Blake Knolls, a reef-building coral community in deeper, colder waters, better able to withstand the pressures of a hotter ocean.
- Northern, Central, and Southern Million Mounds—all key components of a 200-mile “coral highway” that runs offshore from Georgia to central Florida.
- Blake Ridge Diapir Cold Seep, a deep methane seep that feeds unique bacteria colonies fueled by chemical energy instead of sunlight. We are still learning the importance of these seeps, and the role they play in healthy fisheries.

We urge you to add protections for these key Blake Plateau areas into an updated Gray's Reef sanctuary management plan. We look forward to working with you to ensure this precious ecosystem is celebrated by Americans for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Anthropocene Alliance

Birds Georgia

Carolina Ocean Alliance

Center for a Sustainable Coast

Center for Biological Diversity

Cherokee Concerned Citizens

The CLEO Institute

Coastal Conservation League

Conservation Voters of South Carolina

Creation Justice Ministries

Defenders of Wildlife

EarthEcho International

Edisto Island Preservation Alliance

Environment Georgia

FutureSwell

Georgia Conservancy

Georgia Conservation Voters

Georgia Interfaith Power and Light
GreenLatinos
Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition
National Ocean Protection Coalition
Natural Resources Defense Council
Next 100 Coalition
The Ocean Project
Oceana
Satilla Riverkeeper
Sierra Club
South Carolina Environmental Law Project
South Carolina Native Plant Society
South River Watershed Alliance
Surfrider Foundation
Sustainable Ocean Alliance
Wild Cumberland

cc: Russell Kent, GRNMS Advisory Council Chair
Dr. Lauren Stefaniak, GRNMS Advisory Council Vice-Chair
Kent Wicker, GRNMS Advisory Council Executive Officer