



FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Environmental Assessment on the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary Final management plan

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Ocean Service, Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS), Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary has completed an environmental assessment (EA) dated June 2009 to evaluate the potential environmental effects associated with implementing the final management plan (FMP). The EA is the basis for NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries finding of no significant impact for implementing the FMP.

NOAA Administrative Order (NAO) 216-6 (revised May 20, 1999) provides eleven criteria for determining the significance of the impacts of a proposed action. These criteria are discussed below with respect to the proposed action. Based on the analysis in the environmental assessment, the ONMS finds that:

1. Are there both beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed action that when combined result in a net benefit?

The purpose of the proposed action, the implementation of the FMP, is to protect and manage Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary in a manner that satisfies legal mandates set forth in the National Marine Sanctuaries Act. The Proposed Action to implement the FMP would result in net beneficial effects on sanctuary maritime heritage resources as compared to the No Action alternative. However, these beneficial impacts would not be significant. Implementation of the FMP would result in no significant negative effects.

The FMP will improve management and overall protection of shipwrecks and other maritime heritage resources in Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Beneficial effects of the Proposed Action on the area's maritime heritage resources and landscape features would result from improved planning and coordination of resource protection, education and outreach, and research programs, compared to the No Action alternative. Although it is expected that plan implementation will result in overall beneficial effects to the human environment, these beneficial effects do not represent a significant impact.

Many of the activities in the FMP are extensions of programs already offered by the sanctuary as set forth in the original, 1999 management plan and would not, therefore, produce significant positive or negative effects. The Proposed Action would not have adverse impacts. Therefore the beneficial impacts would be a net benefit.

The Proposed Action's environmental effects are described in the EA.

2. What is the degree to which public health or safety is affected by the proposed action?



The Sanctuary Operations and Administration Action Plan contains a strategy for developing procedures for ensuring safety for staff and sanctuary visitors. This includes continuing to partner with Alpena Regional Medical Center's Center for Wound Healing and Hyperbaric Medicine to ensure access to local hyperbaric treatment for dive accidents, developing and implementing procedures to ensure the safety of staff and the public, and improving marine safety by providing the public with accurate and up-to-date weather conditions. The proposed action would have beneficial effects on public health and safety.

3. Are there unique characteristics of the geographic area in which the proposed action is to take place?

Located in northwestern Lake Huron, off Alpena, Michigan, Thunder Bay is adjacent to one of the most treacherous stretches of water within the Great Lakes system. Unpredictable weather, murky fog banks, sudden gales, and rocky shoals earned the area the name "Shipwreck Alley." Historical research indicates that more than 200 shipwrecks lie below the waters in and around Thunder Bay. The sheer number of shipwrecks is impressive. However, it is their excellent state of preservation and what they represent—a century and a half of maritime commerce and travel on the Great Lakes—that elevates them to national and international significance deserving an exceptional level of protection, study, and public interpretation. The FMP would ensure that the area continues to be properly managed.

4. What is the degree to which effects on the human environment are likely to be highly controversial?

Many of the activities in the FMP are extensions of programs already offered by the sanctuary as set forth in the original, 1999 management plan. None of the effects of implementation of the FMP on the quality of the human environment are particularly controversial. However, the plan does contain a strategy to evaluate and assess a proposed expansion of the sanctuary to a 3,662-square-mile area from Alcona County to Presque Isle County, east to the international border with Canada. Though the strategy only seeks to evaluate and assess the Thunder Bay Sanctuary Advisory Council's recommendation to expand to this area, the topic of expansion may be controversial. The sanctuary received several comments on expansion during the public comment period for the Draft Management Plan and all were in favor of sanctuary expansion. Congress has shown an interest in expanding the sanctuary by means of direct congressional action. Should this occur, NOAA would not need to assess the recommendation to expand the sanctuary area and therefore, the possibility of administrative controversy would be eliminated.

5. What is the degree to which effects are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks?

The proposed action involves implementing a management plan designed to better protect sanctuary shipwrecks and other maritime heritage resources. The proposed action is not highly uncertain and does not involve unique or unknown risks.

6. What is the degree to which the action establishes a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration?

The proposed FMP establishes a framework to allow resource managers to plan and execute current and future management activities in a manner that satisfies legal mandates set forth in the National Marine Sanctuaries Act. Any future management activities beyond the scope of this management plan or that could result in significant effects would undergo further NEPA and HRS Chapter 343 analysis on a case-by-case basis.

7. Does the proposed action have individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts?

Implementation of all the activities in the FMP will result in overall beneficial impacts to the sanctuary's shipwrecks and maritime heritage resources. While there are some activities that may individually result in minor impacts, there are no cumulatively significant adverse or beneficial impacts to the maritime heritage resources anticipated as a result of the proposed action.

The Proposed Action's environmental effects are described in the EA.

8. What is the degree to which the action adversely affects entities listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources?

The proposed action would not adversely affect areas listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic places. Implementation of the proposed action would have beneficial impacts on maritime heritage resources, as there are specific action plans to locate, identify, and protect such resources, as well as prepare National Register of Historic Places nominations for appropriate sites.

9. What is the degree to which endangered or threatened species, or their critical habitat as defined under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, are adversely affected?

The proposed action would not affect endangered or threatened species, or their critical habitat as defined under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

10. Is a violation of Federal, state, or local law for environmental protection threatened?

The proposed action does not threaten a violation of federal, state, or local law requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

11. Will the proposed action result in the introduction or spread of a nonindigenous species?

The proposed action would not result in the introduction or spread of a nonindigenous species. The Research Action Plan calls for developing partnerships with multi-disciplinary researchers and organizations to study Great Lakes ecology, including non-indigenous species.

FONSI Statement

In view of the analysis presented in this document, the Environmental Assessment on the Final Management Plan for Thunder Bay Marine National Marine Sanctuary (dated July 2009), the proposed action will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment with specific reference to the criteria contained in Section 6.01 of NAO 216-6, Environmental Review Procedures for Implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Accordingly, the preparation of an environmental impact statement for the proposed action of implementing the final management plan is not necessary.

John H. Dunnigan
Assistant Administrator

Date