

MPA NEWS



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Manager Profile: Carol Bernthal, Superintendent, Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary, USA

Carol Bernthal is unique among sanctuary managers in the US National Marine Sanctuary Program. Rather than rising through the program's ranks to become superintendent of the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary (OCNMS), Bernthal came straight from a job representing local indigenous tribes on regional resource issues. Bernthal's background provides her a good fit. Among the dozen sanctuaries in the National Marine Sanctuary Program, the OCNMS has the most interaction with indigenous peoples, with four Native American tribes living along its coastal boundary. Each of these tribes holds specific treaty rights negotiated with the US federal government in the 1800s, including access to "usual and accustomed fishing grounds," the majority of which are in OCNMS waters.

Hired by the sanctuary program in January 1999, Bernthal has had a busy year. She arrived in the middle of the controversial gray whale hunt by the Makah Tribe, an event that drew international attention to the Olympic coast. She also oversaw the OCNMS portion of the Sustainable Seas Expeditions, a submersible-led exploration of the National Marine Sanctuary Program's underwater resources. And she's had an impact. Since her arrival, two tribal members of the OCNMS advisory council have resumed their attendance at the council's meetings, where they had previously perceived a lack of sanctuary interest in their input.

For this month's manager profile, MPA News interviewed Bernthal about her background and her new job.

MPA News: *Please describe to us the responsibilities of your previous position, and how it prepared you for your current job as superintendent of the OCNMS.*

Bernthal: I previously worked for the Point No Point Treaty Council, a tribal consortium on the Olympic Peninsula. [The Council's name derives from the location where the council's treaty was signed.] Four tribes formed it in order to make joint management decisions on fish and wildlife issues and gain more political clout in negotiations with the state and federal governments. I was hired in 1991 as a habitat program coordinator and senior habitat biologist, working on program development and finding strategic approaches to natural resource issues. We worked on some big issues. The Washington State Timber/Fish/Wildlife Agreement, to which we were a party, dealt with how logging should be managed on private and state forest lands. We also worked with local governments on growth management issues.

The job taught me that you can't sit in your office and hope to solve problems. It's important to learn about a community's issues in order to develop collective solutions. There will always be overlap between your objectives and other peoples', and you have to find where that overlap is. In terms of being offered my current job, the fact that I had a background with the tribes probably helped: having someone who understands tribal treaty rights is important to continuing the relationship between the Sanctuary and the tribes. In fact, when I began my new job, I was a little concerned that people would still view me as primarily a tribal representative. But that really hasn't happened, thankfully.

MPA News: *Can you talk a little about how the OCNMS managed the contentious Makah whaling situation earlier this year, which involved tribesmen harpooning a gray whale in the Sanctuary's waters?*

Bernthal: The Sanctuary's role was really quite minimal, since the decision on whether or not whaling should occur by the Makah was handled primarily through the International Whaling Commission, with hunting oversight by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service. [The United States government supported the Tribe's historical right to hunt whales, carrying a request on behalf of the tribe to the International Whaling Commission.] During the official designation of the Sanctuary, it was made clear that the Sanctuary would honor its obligations to the tribes, including the exercise of treaty rights and the protection of marine and cultural resources. As the gray whale population has recovered to its historic level [and been delisted from the US Endangered Species list], the issue is more a moral debate: "Is it right or wrong to kill a whale?" But it was also very much about a tribe regaining some of its cultural heritage and pride, especially for a community that had seen some pretty hard times. It's very difficult for a modern culture without such a heritage to place itself in this situation. In addition, it forces us to examine how we treat "recovered" species: can we allow the use of an animal when the population as a whole has returned to sustainable levels?

MPA News: *The role of commercial fishing in national marine sanctuaries has been questioned in the press lately in terms of its appropriateness. Do you foresee its role changing in the future?*

Bernthal: The issue of fishing in marine reserves is going to be a big one in the next few years. Here [at the Sanctuary], we're in the information gathering stage. We're starting to focus our research program on the effect of bottom trawling on benthic habitat and fish communities in areas with variable levels of fishing efforts. In our initial review of historical fishing patterns, we couldn't find any "pristine untrawled" areas within the sanctuary, so we will be doing a comparison of areas that have been lightly and heavily trawled. This is pioneering work for the US west coast. Next summer, we'll look very closely at these sites using remote sensing as well as direct observations using a submersible. We also plan on continuing work to characterize habitats within the sanctuary and gain a better understanding about fish communities and habitat associations. All of this will lend critical information for making informed decisions on the feasibility of locating marine reserves on the Olympic Peninsula.

MPA News: *Do you foresee the designation of no-harvest areas in the sanctuary?*

Bernthal: We're not even close to that at this point. There is much more research that needs to be done, and there would have to be a lot of public outreach and input before we moved forward with any closing of areas. And with regard to getting tribal buy-in, I would imagine they would want to see pretty strong proof of the impact of fishing before agreeing to close an area because the tribes' rights to fish are limited to specific geographic areas based on their traditional use patterns.

I think no-harvest areas have a role in creating sustainable fisheries over time, but they really need to be done in conjunction with other fishery management tools and they have to be carefully planned and implemented. Traditional fishing management techniques have not been entirely successful to date, so it's time to look at other possibilities, but we do have to be careful not to oversell what MPAs can do. Recovering some of these overfished populations will take time, especially with long-lived species like the rockfish that we have here. If we don't see recovery within a couple years of designating a reserve, does that mean that we abandon MPAs? I hope not. We have to make a long-term commitment to evaluating and reviewing no-harvest areas. They're a fairly new approach, and I imagine there will be changes as we learn and experiment with the concept.

For more information:

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Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary

The Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary is located off the Pacific coast of the Olympic Peninsula in the state of Washington, USA. The Sanctuary spans 8,575 sq. kilometers (3,310 sq. miles) and contains rich fishing and shellfishing grounds. It also supports one of the world's most diverse kelp communities and is visited by 29 species of marine mammals, including whales, dolphins, and porpoises. For more information, view the OCNMS web site, at www.sanctuaries.nos.noaa.gov/oms/omsolympic/omsolympic.html.

Coming up in MPA News...

When are consensus-based processes appropriate for the planning and management of MPAs? When are they inappropriate? We'll sort it out... Plus, stay tuned for our guide to MPA nomenclature, a list of MPA-related meetings for the coming year, book reviews, and more news and analysis from around the world.

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