

IN THE WORLD OF UNDERSEA CONSERVATION, NOAA's Monitor Marine Sanctuary stands alone. It's the smallest — just one nautical mile in diameter, 16 miles off Cape Hatteras — and protects just one wreck: *USS Monitor*, the Civil War ironclad that rests 230 feet below the surface. Considering it's the most important wreck in American naval history, it's no surprise that the tiny sanctuary has fierce restrictions — gaining permission to dive it entails a long and not always successful permitting process.

After three decades of focusing solely on the *Monitor*, in 2008 NOAA started asking the question: What if we expanded the sanctuary's mission to protect these other historic sites? Only they've yet to say what "expansion" means. Would it cover just the most famous military wrecks — or the entire graveyard? Does increased protection mean a few mooring buoys so boats won't tie to the wrecks — or a bunch more permits to keep them from trying? Six years later, they've still not answered these questions. What's filled the void is exactly what you might expect: suspicion, worry and a lot of fear that a giant "Keep Out" sign might soon stretch for miles offshore.

"I know this is frustrating for the public because NOAA's only response has been, 'We can't tell you what it looks like,'" says Sanctuary Superintendent David Alberg. "It sounds like we are being evasive when, technically, we haven't even really started."

But things are beginning to move. In 2013, the sanctuary's management plan included steps to explore expansion. In February, that process began as a working group of stakeholders — members of the fishing industry, tourism reps, and, of course, divers — met for the very first time. That collective will continue to gather concerns and suggestions, weighing potential rewards and future risks, then present ideas for public comment. From there, NOAA says they will begin to have enough information to start answering questions. Until then, they're not offering many details — just frequent assurances that a bigger sanctuary won't decrease access.

"Our primary concern is the protection of the physical resources at the bottom of the ocean from things like anchors, commercial fishing nets and artifact removal," says Paul Ticco, NOAA's Regional Coordinator for the Northeast and Great Lakes Region. "I think we'd all like to see increased access

for diving. And this is not a situation we're creating out of thin air — there are examples."

The model NOAA refers to most is Lake Huron's Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, located in Alpena, Michigan. Before they officially recognized this sunken collection of more than 50 relics in 2000, NOAA faced intense blowback from Alpena's residents. But by 2011, the town was so pleased with the increase in tourism and awareness that the same people who once wore buttons crying, "Say no to NOAA," were asking to expand the site even more.

"From what we've seen from Thunder Bay, I see an amazing opportunity for coastal North Carolina," says Alberg. "Not to keep anyone away, but to take this story to a

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much wider audience. People who may not even be scuba divers, but who share this maritime history with all of us."

So far, the NC dive community doesn't share the same enthusiasm. In fact, the only person we found who sounds willing to consider the idea is Bunch, who also serves on the stakeholder group.

"Nobody else has stepped forward to give this amazing resource this type of recognition," Bunch says. "So as long as it doesn't infringe upon anyone's rights — divers, fishermen, the public in general — and provided everyone works together to do something good, I think it's probably a good idea."

But the rest of the diving community? They say this isn't the Great Lakes. That the divers who are up to the Graveyard of the

Atlantic's formidable challenges are already well aware of its amazing bounty — and the ones who aren't should probably stick to coral reefs in the Caribbean. And while they'll proudly state the Outer Banks has a maritime history that's worthy of recognition, they don't think it's worth the risk of diving in with the feds.

"Those divers in the [Great Lakes] are looking for a walk in the park — this is more like climbing Mount Everest," says David Sommers, the *Lion's Paw* captain who helped put together a wreck symposium with Barker and others last summer. "While I'd like to believe that NOAA is as wound up about shipwrecks and their history as I am, no matter the intent, the execution will create rules, regulations and restrictions. Those rules will change over time. I don't care what anyone promises."

IN THE END, THE GHOST THAT HANGS OVER the Graveyard of the Atlantic isn't Adolf Hitler. Or even Jacques Cousteau. It's Conrad L. Wirth, the National Park Service Director who promised Cape Hatteras would stay open forever when it became federal property in 1953 — then left 60 years of successors holding on to the keys. For anyone who's witnessed all the access nastiness of the past 15 years, just the thought of another decade of deciding what to do with a larger maritime sanctuary is enough to just say, "No."

But while that debate still seethes with anger, the main participants in this potential showdown — the divers — are showing uncanny courtesy, at least amongst themselves. Because when you spend your life clinging to the same wrecks, researching the same history and experiencing the same undersea wonders — at depths few people will ever attempt — you can't help but develop a certain level of trust. Or at least respect.

"I still communicate with NOAA," says JT Barker. "I don't hold any grudges. Me and Joe [Hoyt] have things we don't agree on, but we get along fine; we even exchange numbers because we're both looking for the U-576"

Likewise, Hoyt, the Maritime Archeologist for NOAA's Monitor Marine Sanctuary, is equally aware that while every political process is turbulent, the waters here are particularly troubled. ▶



Says *Lion's Paw* captain, Dave Sommers: "Whether it's academic research or private charter, we all dive for similar reasons." Top to bottom: CSI goes high-def; Corbett and Barker fix the prop; NOAA charts fresh territory. Photos: NOAA/CSI and LWW

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