



# Big Oil Could Benefit Most from Review of Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Monument

By Michael Conathan and Avery Siciliano July 25, 2017

In September 2016, former President Barack Obama established the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument, which became the first such protected area in federal waters of the continental United States.<sup>1</sup> Although not nearly as large in scope as the other marine national monuments, which are all in the remote Pacific Ocean, the newly designated area protects a marine biodiversity hotspot that encompasses a habitat teeming with sea life, including endangered whales, seabirds, and at least 73 species of rare deep-sea corals.<sup>2</sup>

Yet this bold action is now under threat. In April, President Donald Trump signed two executive orders—the first calls for a “review” of 27 large-scale monuments on land and in the ocean, and the second takes direct aim at marine monuments and National Marine Sanctuaries.<sup>3</sup> The Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument is a target of both orders. Moreover, Trump’s effort to weaken or undo these critical protections, which came after more than a year of public input solicited by the U.S. Department of Commerce and other federal agencies, now threatens some of our most unique and fragile marine resources in a New England region that relies on ocean and coastal resources to support 230,000 ocean-related jobs.<sup>4</sup>

While commercial fishing interests have spouted inflated numbers about what the economic impact of the monument designation would be, they have yet to provide any data to back up their assertions. In fact, the publicly available data show that very little fishing has ever occurred in these areas at all. Undoing the monument would cause irreparable harm to these habitats without providing meaningful short-term economic benefits for the commercial fishing industry.

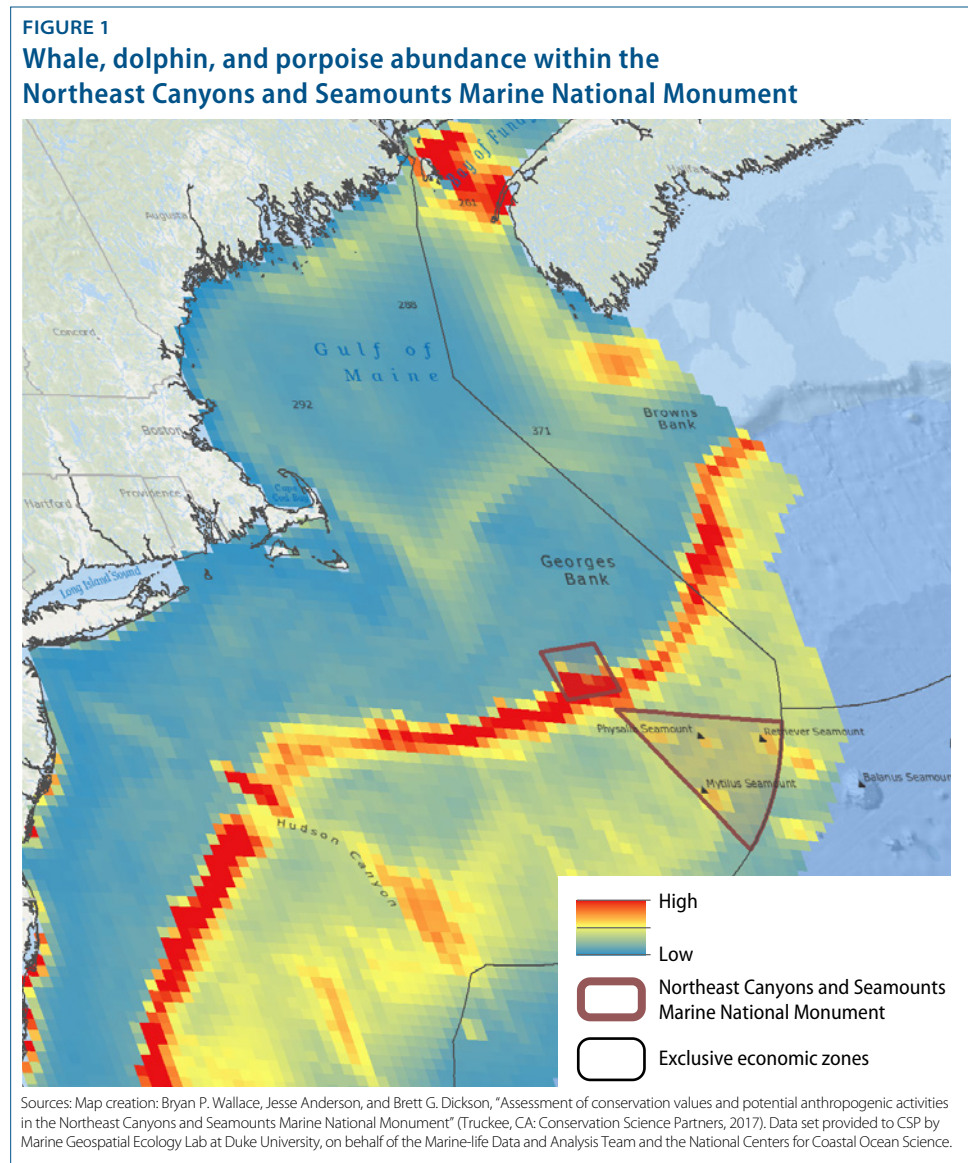
President Trump’s second order, “Implementing an America-First Offshore Energy Strategy,” provides some additional clues suggesting that his motivation for issuing these directives is to aid Big Oil. After asserting that “[i]t shall be the policy of the United States to encourage energy exploration and production, including on the Outer Continental Shelf,” the order initiates a review of all monuments and National Marine Sanctuaries designated or expanded in the past decade to determine the “opportunity cost” associated with protecting these areas.<sup>5</sup> Considering ongoing Canadian oil development just across the international boundary, the fossil fuel industry stands to profit from a rollback of these critical protections in U.S. waters.<sup>6</sup>

To better understand the ocean resources within the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts monument, the Center for American Progress worked with a team of scientists at the nonprofit Conservation Science Partners (CSP) in summer 2017 to analyze marine biodiversity, fishing, and offshore energy data within the monument and surrounding area.

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### What's at stake?

The main reason for designating the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument is that it hosts an incredibly diverse and rich marine ecosystem that is among the least disturbed habitats anywhere in U.S. waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The monument includes the only four seamounts—extinct underwater volcanoes—in U.S. Atlantic waters, as well as three deep sea canyons plunging deeper than the Grand Canyon off the seaward side of Georges Bank. It houses a unique variety of habitats and marine life,<sup>7</sup> including more than 1,000 marine species, including thousand-year-old corals; seabirds; octopuses; dolphins; and beaked, pilot, and endangered sperm whales.<sup>8</sup>



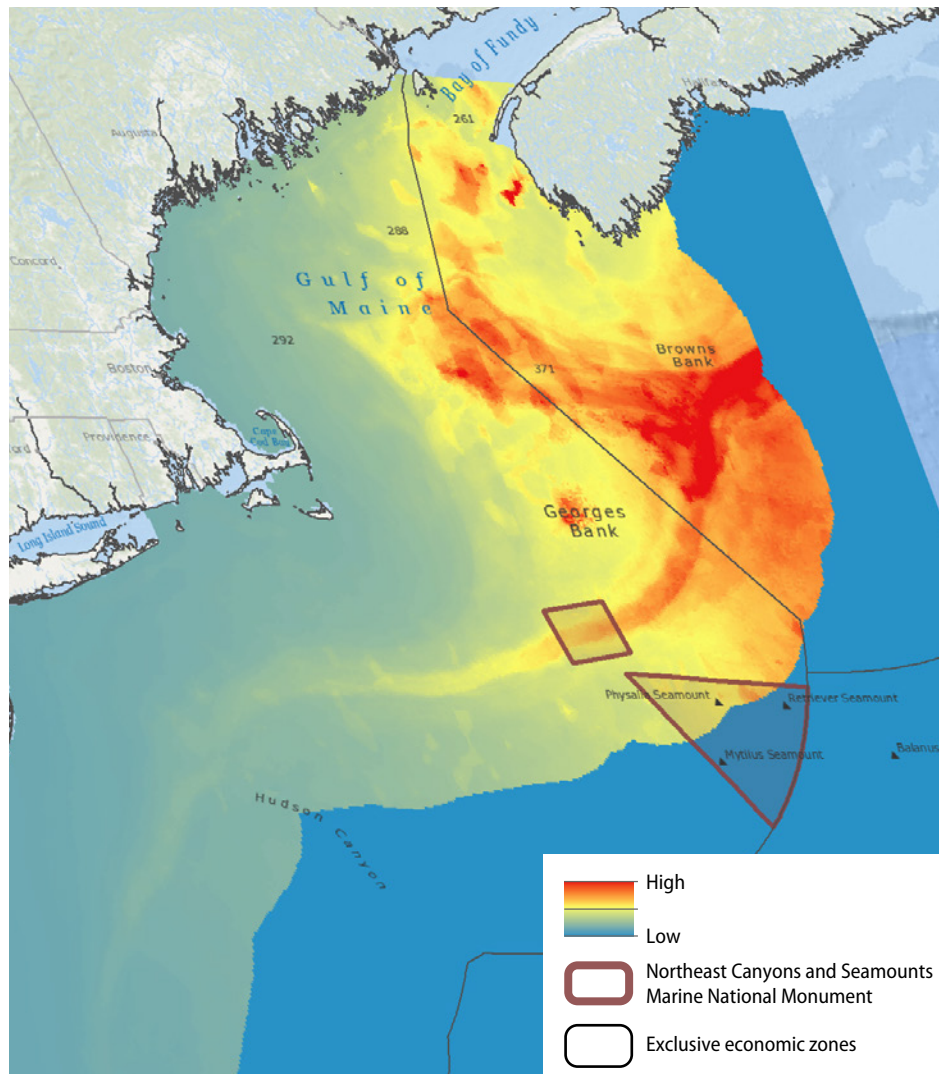
Below: Sperm whale.  
Credit: Flickr/Amila  
Tennakoon



Peter Auster of the University of Connecticut and the Mystic Aquarium has referred to his submarine dives into these canyons as being like “a stroll through Dr. Seuss’s garden.”<sup>9</sup>

Scott Kraus of the New England Aquarium recounts seeing thousands of dolphins migrating across the monument while flying overhead and notes the monument’s importance for migratory marine species.<sup>10</sup> Sea turtles and a variety of fish take refuge in the monument while sharks and highly migratory fish such as tunas and swordfish frequent the area to feed in its nutrient rich water. It is also a frequent stopover for migratory birds such as storm petrels, gulls, terns, and endangered Atlantic puffins.<sup>11</sup>

**FIGURE 2**  
**Atlantic puffin winter abundance within the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument**

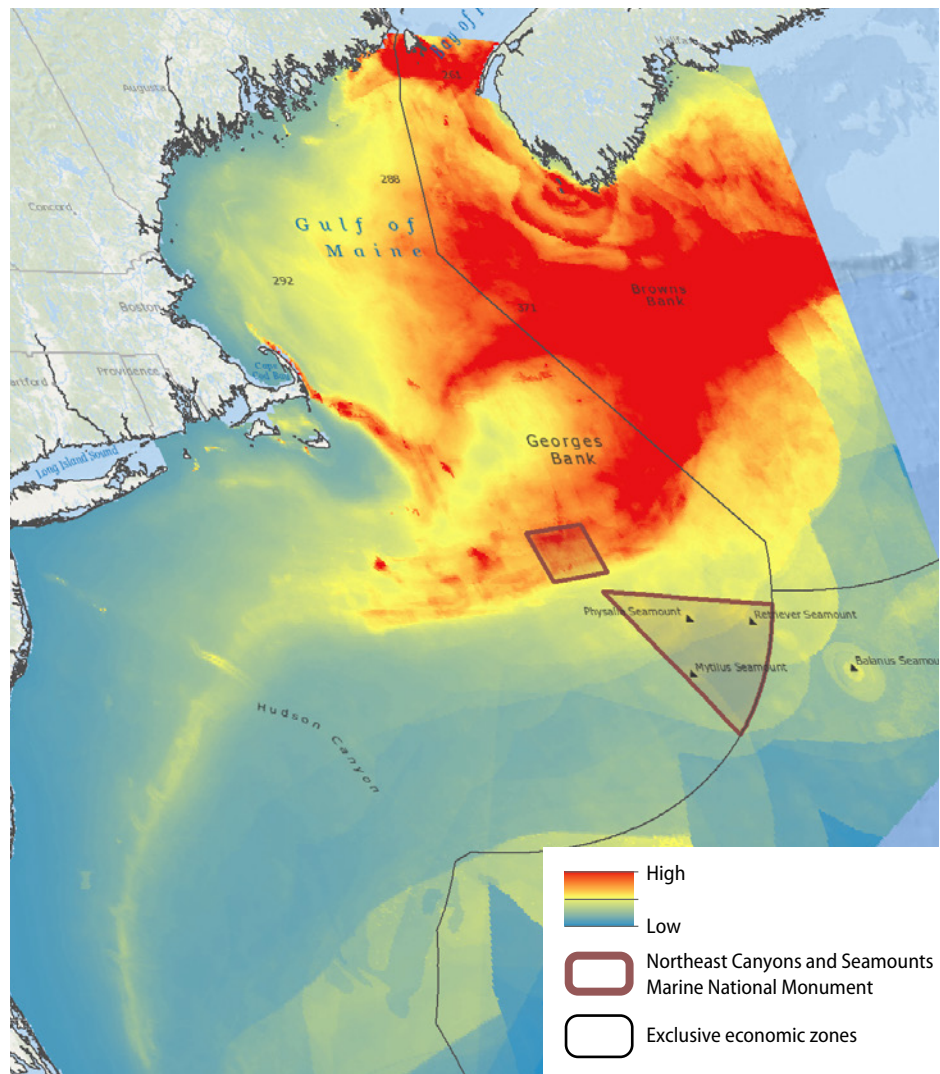


Sources: Map creation: Bryan P. Wallace, Jesse Anderson, and Brett G. Dickson, “Assessment of conservation values and potential anthropogenic activities in the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument” (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2017). Data set provided to CSP by Marine Geospatial Ecology Lab at Duke University, on behalf of the Marine-life Data and Analysis Team and the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science.

Below: Atlantic puffin (*Fregata arctica*).  
 Credit: Flickr/NOAA Photo Library



**FIGURE 3**  
**Offshore bird abundance within the Northeast**  
**Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument**



Sources: Map creation: Bryan P. Wallace, Jesse Anderson, and Brett G. Dickson, "Assessment of conservation values and potential anthropogenic activities in the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument" (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2017). Data set provided to CSP by Marine Geospatial Ecology Lab at Duke University, on behalf of the Marine-life Data and Analysis Team and the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science.

Below: Common Murre.  
 Credit: Flickr/NOAA  
 Photo Library



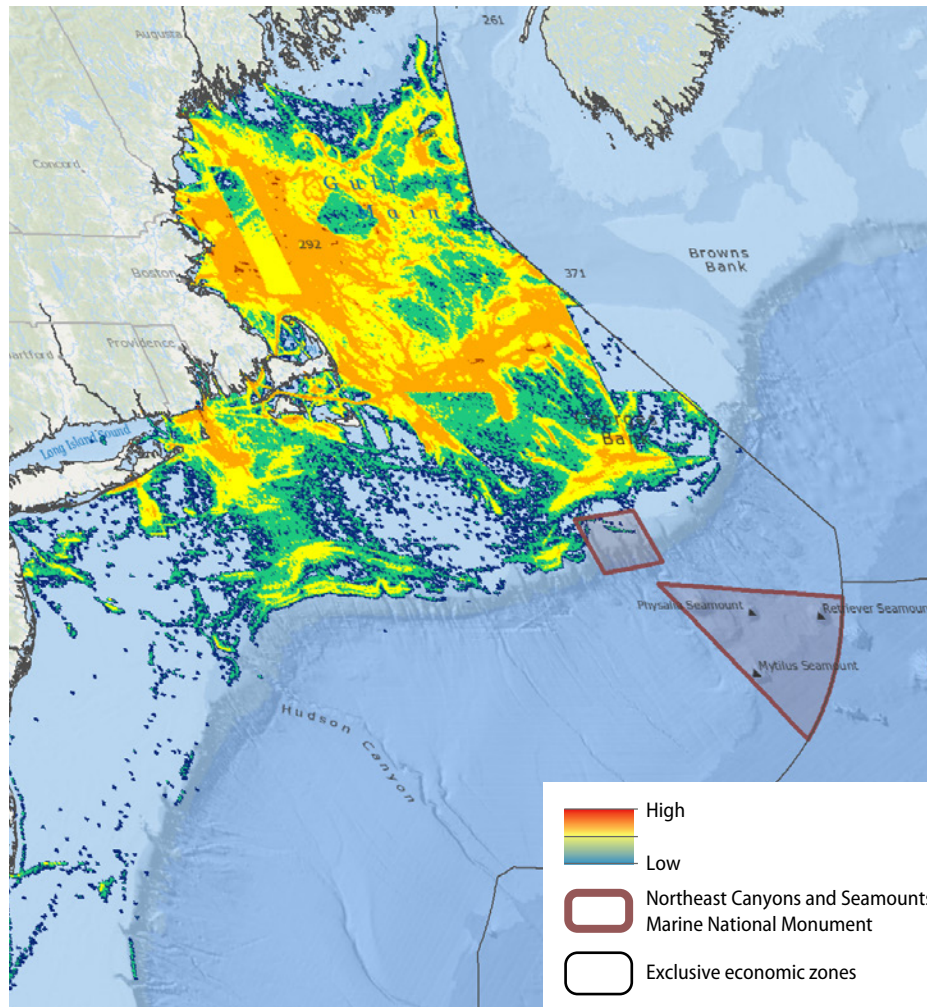
While some fishing has occurred here, the relative lack of human disturbance, and the further protection of the monument designation, provides a living research laboratory within which scientists will be able to study the effects of climate change on relatively undisturbed marine life. Preventing extractive activities within the boundaries also allows species to grow, reproduce, and spread outside the monument's borders. This so-called spillover effect can help rejuvenate commercially and recreationally important fish stocks and support whale watching and seabird tourism industries.

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## Fishing pushback unfounded

Among the general public, support for ocean protection in the region is overwhelming. A Hart Research Associates study conducted for CAP in June 2016 found that 92 percent of respondents across the political spectrum support protecting “special marine areas such as parks and sanctuaries for whales, fish, and corals.”<sup>12</sup>

**FIGURE 4**  
**Groundfishing is nearly nonexistent within the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument**



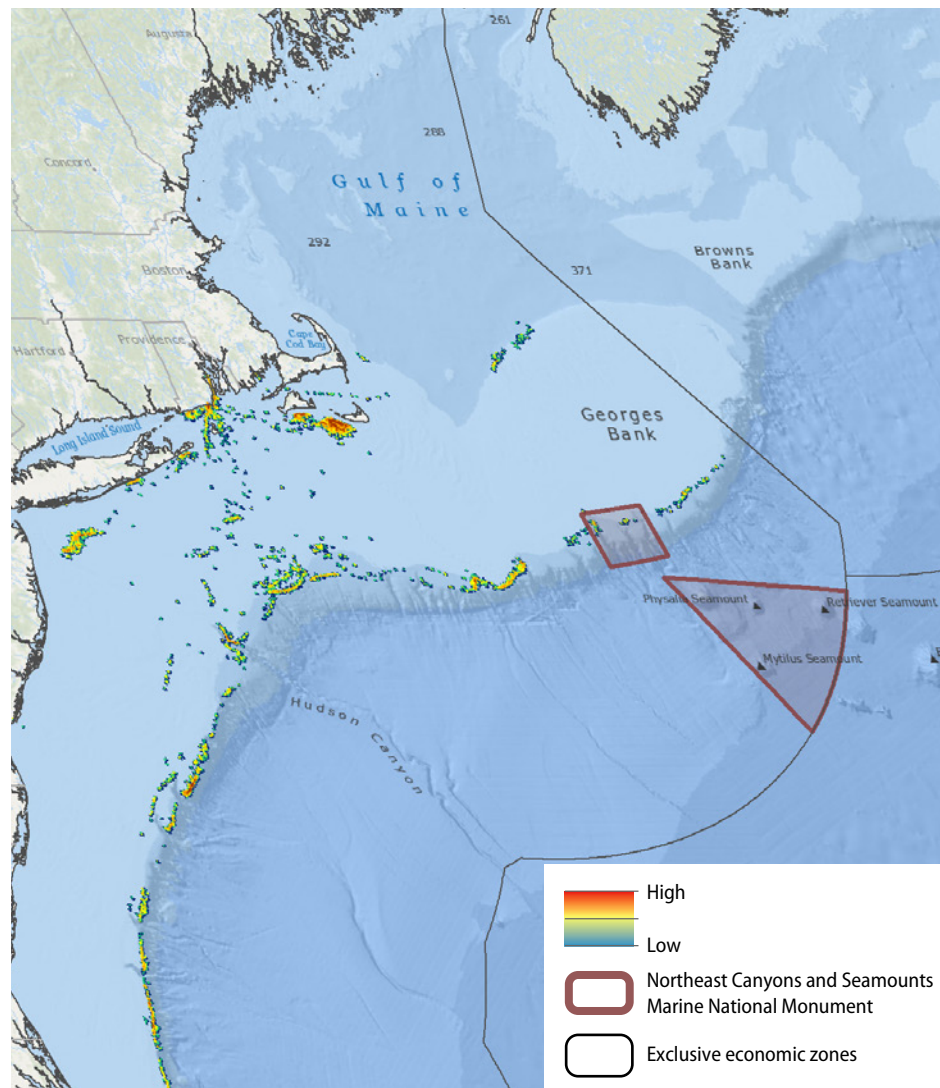
Sources: Map creation: Bryan P. Wallace, Jesse Anderson, and Brett G. Dickson, “Assessment of conservation values and potential anthropogenic activities in the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument” (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2017). Data set provided to CSP by Northeast Regional Ocean Council, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

While many in the recreational fishing community support the monument designation, the commercial fishing industry has opposed it at every turn, even as the Obama administration listened and responded to fishermen’s concerns. Following a September 2015 public listening session on the monument concept that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) held in Providence, Rhode Island, the agency kept a public comment portal open for more than a year.<sup>13</sup> And prior to the designation, leaders from the White House Council on Environmental Quality traveled to

New England on two separate occasions to hear directly from stakeholders, including meetings with commercial fishermen in Boston and New Bedford, Massachusetts, in March and August 2016, respectively. They also held numerous meetings with fishing industry leaders in Washington, D.C. As a result of these and other consultations, the monument area was shrunk by more than 20 percent from what had originally been proposed by the Connecticut congressional delegation led by Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT).<sup>14</sup> The area was also redesigned to accommodate fishing interests, and some fisheries received an unprecedented seven-year grace period before the area would be closed to them.

Both New England’s iconic groundfishery and the Atlantic scallop fishery, which is the highest-value single-species fishery in the nation, are unaffected by the designation, since scallopers do not use this area and only a miniscule portion of groundfish activity occurs within the boundaries. (see Figure 4)<sup>15</sup>

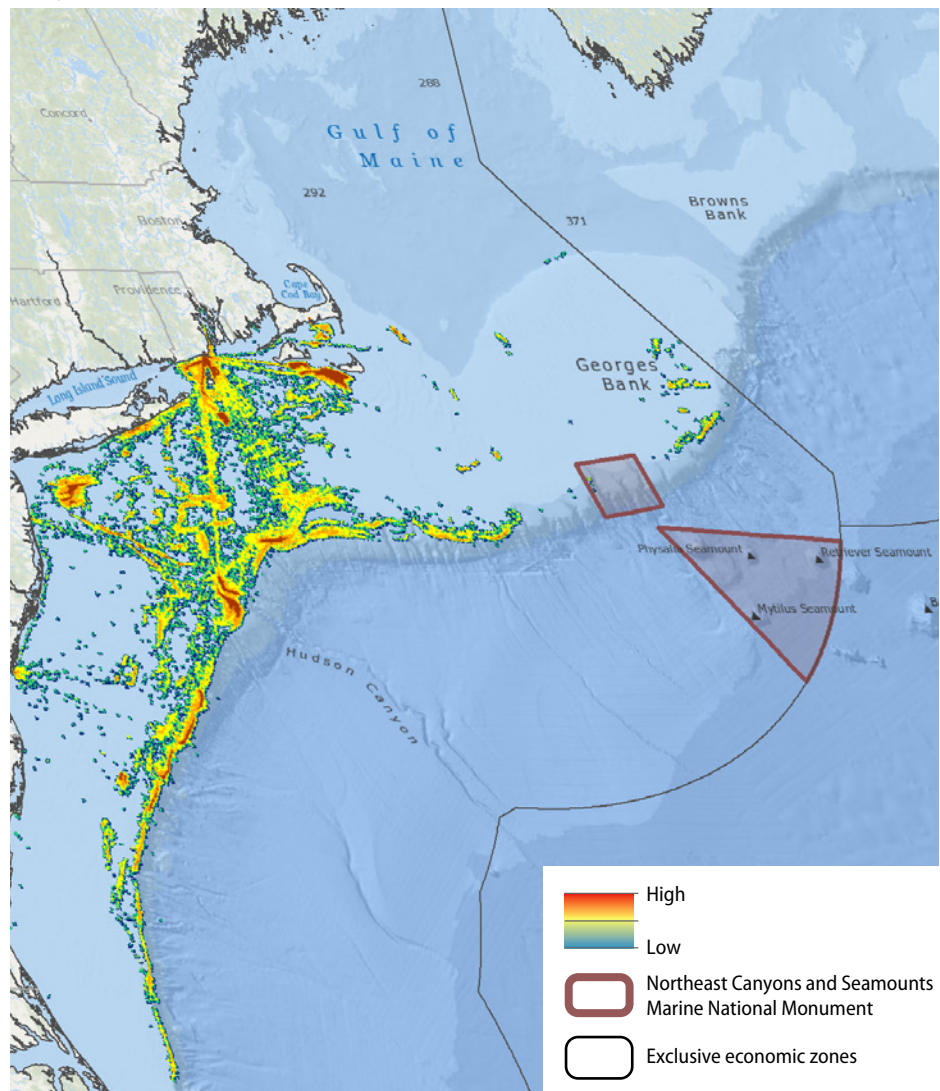
**FIGURE 5**  
**Mackerel fishing is nearly nonexistent within the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument**



Sources: Map creation: Bryan P. Wallace, Jesse Anderson, and Brett G. Dickson, "Assessment of conservation values and potential anthropogenic activities in the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument" (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2017). Data set provided to CSP by Northeast Regional Ocean Council and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

While the monument may affect the few fishermen who have historically operated there, the massive economic damages some have foretold simply do not pass the straight-face test. In June 2017, Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke traveled to Boston to discuss the monument and its pending review with stakeholder groups. During this meeting, a representative of the seafood company SeaFreeze Ltd. expressed concern for the squid, mackerel, and butterfish fleet, claiming that the company’s fishermen have lost “hundreds of thousands of dollars” in the six months since the monument’s restrictions took effect.<sup>16</sup> SeaFreeze’s general manager, Eric Reid, went even further last summer, stating that the designation “could cost \$500 million and ‘countless jobs.’”<sup>17</sup>

**FIGURE 6**  
**Squid fishing is nearly nonexistent within the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument**



Sources: Map creation: Bryan P. Wallace, Jesse Anderson, and Brett G. Dickson, “Assessment of conservation values and potential anthropogenic activities in the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument” (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2017). Data set provided to CSP by Northeast Regional Ocean Council and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

But such claims directly contradict data collected by NOAA. Maps of reported fishing activity created from these data by Conservation Science Partners mirror results cited by the Natural Resources Defense Council in its independent analysis<sup>18</sup> and highlight the lack of fishing activity for mackerel and squid, two species fundamental to SeaFreeze’s business, within the monument area. (see Figures 5 and 6) Neither SeaFreeze nor others in the fishing industry have ever provided any data to prove their claims of economic damages.

Pelagic longline fishing for tunas and swordfish within the monument area has been minimal; this region has represented roughly 1 percent of the longline fleet’s average earnings.<sup>19</sup> Even so, additional consideration was given to this fishery as well. The Obama administration excluded the area between the seamounts and canyons to provide a transit corridor to make it easier for longline fishermen to pursue swordfish and tuna in the areas around the monument.

The heavy pots used in the lobster and crab fisheries can directly affect many of the natural resources in the monument area. They can crush the delicate coral structures on the seabed, and the lines connecting the pots to buoys at the surface can entangle marine mammals. Despite these risks, the Obama administration provided these fishermen an unprecedented seven-year grace period before the closures will apply to them, allowing them ample time to adapt their business plans to the new regulations.<sup>20</sup>

Despite reports that have cited varying degrees of effort among lobster fishermen in the monument area, the overall picture shows minimal impact to a large and robust industry. *The Washington Post* reported that just six vessels spend their full season fishing there, with perhaps 20 additional boats that occasionally use the area<sup>21</sup>—this in a fishery that overall has more than 3,000 boats with permits to fish in federal waters.<sup>22</sup> Catch data for lobster are not reported with the same degree of spatial specificity as other fisheries, with lobstermen only required to report which large management area they fished.<sup>23</sup> But according to an analysis of NOAA data done by the Conservation Law Foundation, the entire management area that contains the canyons protected by the monument produces just 8 percent of all lobster landings. This area includes offshore area from the Canadian boundary line all the way down to the North Carolina-Virginia line, and the monument is only a tiny sliver of that area.<sup>24</sup>

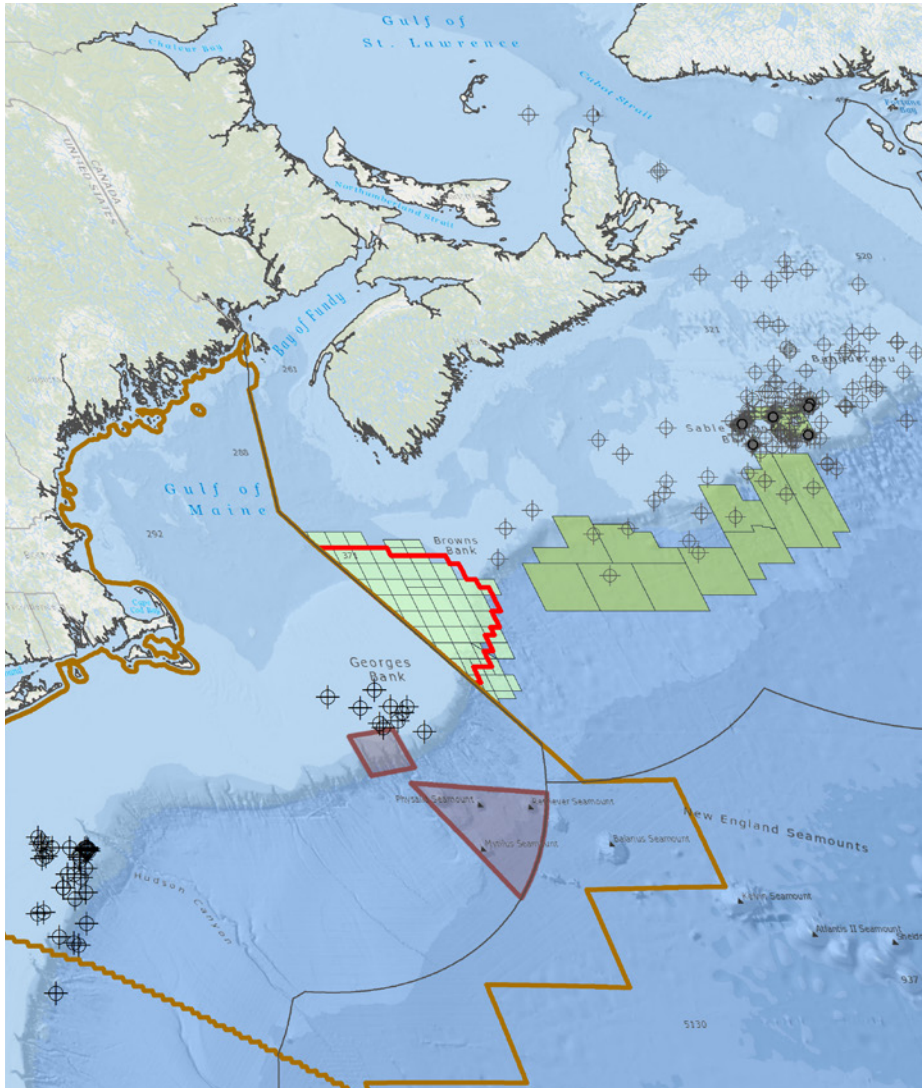
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## Looming offshore oil and gas interests

The rich marine biodiversity coupled with the relative lack of fishing makes the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts monument a prime candidate for permanent protection. Yet the Trump administration is committed to putting this extraordinary ocean protected area on the table for Big Oil by seeking public comment on the “opportunity costs associated with potential energy and mineral exploitation and production from the Outer Continental Shelf.”<sup>25</sup>



**FIGURE 7**  
**Historic and current oil and gas development in U.S.**  
**and Canadian waters of the northwest Atlantic Ocean**



- Canada Georges Bank moratorium
- Exclusive economic zones
- Exploratory permits
- Exploratory licenses
- U.S. North Atlantic Planning Area
- Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument
- + U.S. Atlantic Wells
- ⊕ Canada offshore wells
- Platform locations

Sources: Map creation: Bryan P. Wallace, Jesse Anderson, and Brett G. Dickson, "Assessment of conservation values and potential anthropogenic activities in the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument" (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2017). Data provided to CSP by Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Petroleum Board.

There is no active oil and gas development in U.S. waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, but oil companies have explored there in the past in the areas shown on this map. There is active production, primarily targeting natural gas, in Canadian waters near Sable Island off Nova Scotia. Canada has issued exploratory permits in its section of Georges Bank, but the area is currently under a moratorium until at least 2022. Canadian companies also hold leases along its shelf break to the northeast of U.S. waters.

While there is currently no commercial fossil fuel extraction in U.S. federal waters in the north Atlantic, oil companies have expressed interest in using seismic testing to explore it.<sup>26</sup> Despite overwhelming opposition from state legislators and Atlantic coastal communities, municipal governments, and business organizations who fear the potentially devastating effects of an oil spill on their coastal economies,<sup>27</sup> the Trump administration announced in June that it would begin the process of issuing permits for seismic exploration to five companies.<sup>28</sup>

And while New England legislators and the fishing industry have been united in their staunch opposition to offshore oil and gas development in the Northeast, the area may contain fossil fuel resources, development of which could put at risk the majority of New England's ocean-related jobs, including those in the fishing industry.<sup>29</sup> As recently as the 1980s, oil companies held leases on Georges Bank, and Canada has already leased exploratory permits for oil and gas just across the U.S. border.<sup>30</sup>

In 2016, Canada reaffirmed its commitment to protecting parts of its marine environment by extending a moratorium on authorizing new offshore oil and gas activity in the Canadian portion of Georges Bank.<sup>31</sup> But as Conservation Science Partners' research shows, Big Oil is engaged in active oil and gas production off the coast of Nova Scotia.<sup>32</sup> With President Trump's explicit desire to open up massive new areas of U.S. waters to offshore oil and gas exploration, permanent protection for fragile marine ecosystems such as the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts monument is more critical than ever to defend.

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## Conclusion

America's ocean space—the largest exclusive economic zone in the world—is among the greatest reserves of biodiversity anywhere on the planet. The ocean is also one of the nation's greatest economic engines. To ensure that it is healthy and can continue to provide for all Americans, we must make certain that special areas receive special protections. Like public lands, the ocean belongs to all of us, and it is our job to care for it for future generations of Americans. We must not risk thousands of years of natural history and an endless future of sustainable economic prosperity because of exaggerated claims of short-term economic gain.

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## Endnotes

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