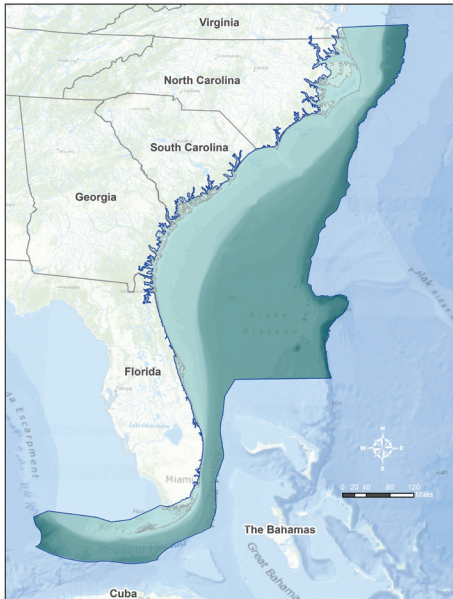




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# SOUTH ATLANTIC BIGHT MARINE ASSESSMENT



## The Region

The South Atlantic Bight Marine Assessment study area, stretches from the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay southward to the Florida Keys. It extends inland to the area of tidal influence and seaward beyond the shallow continental shelf to the base of the U.S. portion of the continental slope [see visual]. Covering more than half the East Coast seaboard, the region includes the entire Atlantic shoreline of four states (*North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida*) and encompasses a coastal population of 15.7 million people.

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The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

Healthy coastal and marine habitats are vital to both people and natural communities. These environments provide the foundation for thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in economic impacts generated every year by the fishing, tourism, shipping, energy and defense industries. However, in these increasingly crowded expanses, diverse human activities are competing more regularly with one another for space which in turn is intensifying the stress on ecological resources.

With new uses emerging, such as wind energy development, resource managers are recognizing the limitations of a sector-by-sector approach to ocean management. This provides an opportunity for more comprehensive and coordinated ocean planning that focuses on the challenges and threats facing multiple ecological resources while minimizing the conflicts amongst various stakeholder groups. An integrated baseline of quantifiable scientific and socio-economic information is essential to guiding these management decisions. This is why The Nature Conservancy is undertaking the development of an ecological assessment for the South Atlantic Bight region.

## Our Goals

The goals of the South Atlantic Bight Marine Assessment are to:

- Establish publicly available biological, physical and human-use baseline data and mapping products that can be used to support ongoing coastal and marine resource management actions
- Evaluate assessment information and related materials to identify areas, species and natural processes that are critical to the region's ecological integrity and resilience

Kayaker in Northeast Florida saltmarsh. © ED MATHEWS





Eroding shoreline caused by rise in sea level along the Albemarle Peninsula, Albemarle Sound area of North Carolina. © JENNIFER E. HENMAN/TNC

## Integrating Data

The South Atlantic Bight Marine Assessment builds on decades of marine research and data collection conducted throughout the southeastern U.S. and on work the Conservancy completed earlier in its Carolinian Ecoregional Assessment (2005) and Marine/Estuarine Site Assessment for Florida (2005). Both of these projects emphasized the prioritization of coastal and ocean habitats for conservation. The Conservancy has since developed new analytical techniques and methodologies for evaluating the marine environment, through our work with the Northwest Atlantic Marine Ecoregional Assessment (2010). The South Atlantic Bight Marine Assessment will draw upon this work by incorporating a wider array of biological, geological, physical, oceanographic and human-use data and information available from federal and state governments, academic institutions, and nonprofit organizations. Initial emphasis within the assessment will be placed on sea floor habitats, coastal ecosystems, demersal fish species, marine mammals and sea turtles.

## Working in Partnership

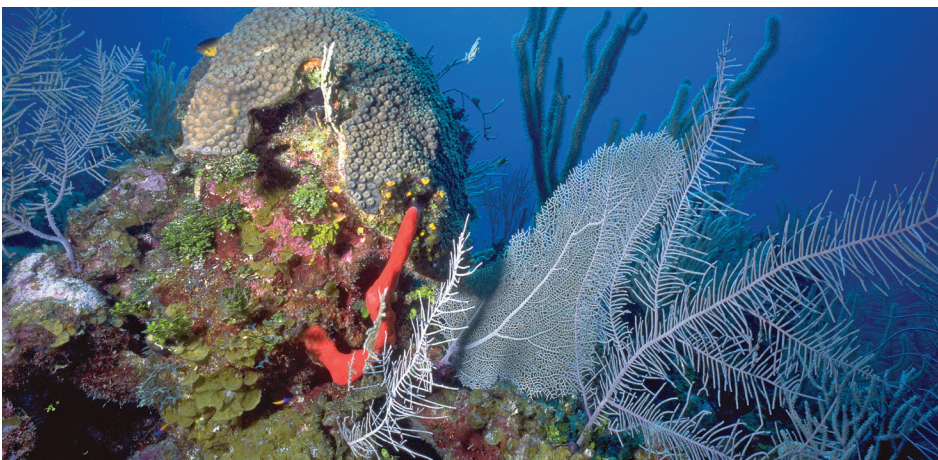
Engaging a variety of partners from across the region will be critical to the project's success. The Conservancy plans to engage technical resource experts throughout the assessment process to ensure the scientific validity of all products. In addition, we will be coordinating with federal and state agencies, regional governance entities (e.g. Governors' South Atlantic Alliance and South Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative) academic institutions, and other environmental non-profits across the region. This commitment to partnership will help meet the Assessment goal of developing a robust, transparent, and publicly distributable baseline of coastal and ocean resource information and data products that can be used by a wide range of marine decision-makers.

Sunrise over the lower Altamaha River and the Darien waterfront. The lower Altamaha River is home to more imperiled species than any other river system in Georgia: over 120 rare or endangered plant and animal species. The river is also a key source of revenue for the area by means of commercial fishing and tourism. © ERIKA NORTEMANN/TNC



## NATURAL RESOURCES OF THE SOUTH ATLANTIC:

- Extensive saltmarshes form the sheltered coastline of the South Atlantic from Cape Hatteras to Cape Canaveral. These habitats are a key reason why over 75% of the regions' commercial and recreational fishery species spend a portion of their life cycle in estuaries.
- The endangered Northern Atlantic Right Whale calving grounds are located off the coast of northeast Florida and Georgia.
- Live hard bottom habitat represents approximately 20 percent of the South Atlantic continental shelf seafloor habitat and supports more than 70 percent of regional offshore fisheries.
- Deep water coral reefs can be located in depths up to 900 meters where they can grow to over 100 meters in height and live thousands of years,



Coral reef ecosystems provide habitat for a rich and diverse range of marine species. © NANCY SEFTON

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