



Notice to Submariners

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

SUBNOTE-2026-002

Issued: February 20, 2026

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Source: PSUBS.ORG

Subject: Florida Keys National Marine Sactuary – Operational Guidance

Distribution: PSUBS Members

PURPOSE

This SUBNOTE provides guidance to PSUBS members operating personal submersibles in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS). Its intent is to promote responsible operations that respect sanctuary objectives, marine habitats, and community standards. This notice is advisory only and does not confer regulatory authority.

APPLICABILITY

This notice applies to all PSUBS-affiliated submersible operations conducted within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary; however, compliance is strongly recommended for all submersible operators regardless of affiliation.

OPERATIONAL GUIDANCE

1. Operate in accordance with all federal, local, NOAA, and PSUBS laws, rules, and regulations.
2. Obtain any required permits in advance.
3. Notify FKNMS personnel prior to diving.
4. Use navigation charts and GPS to avoid entering SPAs unless explicitly permitted under a separate NOAA or FKNMS authorization.
5. No anchoring; employ mooring buoys or established drop points to minimize impact on coral reefs.
6. Avoid contact with the bottom.
7. Maintain a respectable horizontal distance from, and strict no-contact protocols with, any reef or mammal marine life.
8. Maintain positive buoyancy at all times to ensure:
 - a. The submersible will rise rather than settle on the bottom, in the event of thruster failure or lack of pilot input.
 - b. Prop wash is directed upwards preventing disturbance of the bottom.
9. Maintain zero discharge protocols except as allowed by FKNMS regulations.
10. Tie-off to surface support vessels.
11. Report any accidental reef contact or marine incidents to NOAA authorities.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Act as good stewards of the environment and sensitive habitats.
2. Minimize impact by reducing disturbance to wildlife, limiting sediment disruption, and respecting all signage and marked zones.

SANCTUARY PRESERVATION AREAS

Sanctuary Preservation Areas (SPAs) within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary are designated for the strict protection of coral reefs, sea grass beds, and critical marine habitats. They exist to preserve the most ecologically sensitive and biologically diverse regions of the sanctuary, providing safe refuges for marine life, supporting ecosystem resilience, and allowing natural processes to continue undisturbed.

Upon NOAA approval, operate in SPAs with heightened caution and precision, carefully plan dives, monitor conditions, and ensure all crew are aware of the need to minimize impact.

Sanctuary Preservation Areas in the FKNMS include:

1. Alligator Reef SPA
2. Carysfort SPA
3. Cheeca Rocks SPA
4. Coffins Patch SPA
5. Conch Reef SPA
6. Davis Reef SPA
7. Eastern Dry Rocks SPA
8. The Elbow SPA
9. Hen and Chickens SPA
10. Key Largo Dry Rock-Grecian Rocks SPA
11. Looe Key SPA
12. Molasses Reef SPA
13. Newfound Harbor Key SPA
14. Sand Key SPA
15. Sombrero Key SPA
16. Turtle Rocks SPA
17. Turtle Shoal SPA

PERMITTING

Submariners are cautioned to notify NOAA and seek any necessary permits prior to commencement of operations within the boundaries of the FKNMS.

REFERENCES / RESOURCES

- Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary - Federal Law
<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-15/subtitle-B/chapter-IX/subchapter-B/part-922/subpart-P>
- Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary – MAP
<https://floridakeys.noaa.gov/about/sanctuary.html>
- Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary - Sanctuary Preservation Areas
<https://floridakeys.noaa.gov/zones/spas/welcome.html>
- NOAA Permitting Information:
<https://floridakeys.noaa.gov/activities/permits.html>
- Personal Submersibles Organization (PSUBS):
<http://www.psubs.org>

DISCLAIMER

This SUBNOTE is issued for guidance and educational purposes only. It does not substitute for federal, state, or local regulations. Operators must comply with all applicable laws and maintain responsible conduct to safeguard marine resources and the PSUBS community reputation.

CONTACT / QUESTIONS

For clarification or further guidance, please contact the PSUBS leadership team via the official PSUBS communication channels.