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DEDICATED ISSUE

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary

Foreword

What is it about the Flower Garden Banks that is so compelling? Geologists are drawn there, intrigued by the underlying salt dome formations. Oil companies drill for rich deposits of oil and gas nearby. Biologists revel in a diversity of life so great that, within an area they can embrace with their arms, more broad categories of plants and animals prosper than within many miles of the most lush rain forests on earth. In this living natural laboratory, sponges, corals, flatworms, peanut worms, polychaete worms, mollusks, starfish, crabs, comb jellies, sea squirts, and many others vie for a toehold on the tops of these almost-islands that come to within 20 m of the sea surface. In the surrounding deep water other creatures prosper, luring scientists with new tools, submersibles, and remotely operated vehicles to explore and report back the nature of what is there.

I first learned about this undersea oasis from divers who in the 1960s had listened to fishermen's tales of a shallow bank surrounded by deep sea on all sides, 100 miles south of the coasts of Louisiana and Texas—a place where grouper, snapper, and numerous other fish abound. Divers went to see for themselves and sometimes found hundreds of hammerheads gathering there in the winter and giant mantas cruising by, lingering sometimes to feed or engage divers in an undersea ballet. They found there the largest fish in the world, plankton-eating whale sharks, and sea turtles who pause to rest. In recent years, the place has become

a popular diving destination, with some timing their late summer trips to coincide with the moment when "all heaven breaks loose" underwater as resident reef corals and other creatures simultaneously spawn, transforming the usually clear waters into what looks like an upside-down underwater snowstorm.

Designated in 1992 as an National Marine Sanctuary under the jurisdiction of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Flower Garden Banks continue to attract wild creatures and people for many reasons. Cooperation between oil companies that actively recover petrochemicals within sight of the reefs and those responsible for protecting the area as a Marine Sanctuary has become an encouraging model of collaboration and resolution of potential conflicts.

In this collection of papers, researchers report their findings about this special place, each with a different perspective, each providing new and valuable insights that together provide a new benchmark of understanding. The future of the Flower Garden Banks depends on such knowledge, hard won through years of careful observations. The present report combines the distillation of past research with the most recent findings and will help insure that the Flower Gardens continue to prosper, with management policies guided by an increasingly astute understanding of whatever it is that makes the Flower Garden Banks the special place that it is.

SYLVIA A. EARLE, *March 1999, on a little boat somewhere off the Galapagos Islands*