Exploring the Blake Plateau

Chapter 1
Discovering the Blake Plateau

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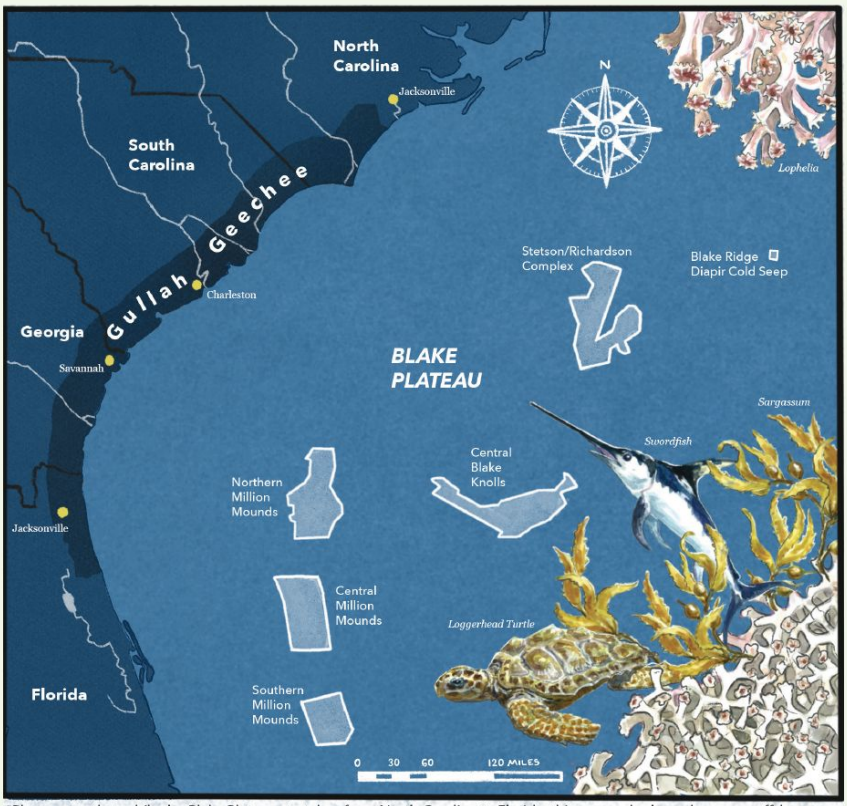
Introduction

Welcome to the **Blake Plateau**, a deep-sea region off the U.S. Southeast coast teeming with **biodiversity** and geologic wonders. The content and activities in this chapter will help learners explore where the Blake Plateau is, what makes it ecologically important, and how its **deep-sea corals** compare to more familiar shallow-water coral reefs.

Important Ecological Features of the Blake Plateau



*Please note that while the Blake Plateau stretches from North Carolina to Florida, this map only shows key areas offshore South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Conversations with scientists helped shape the polygons' boundaries.

Map by Jessica Russo; Illustrations by Richard Jones

The Blake Plateau is home to the world's largest deep-sea coral province. From the top of the water column to the seafloor, the Blake Plateau is a refuge for sea turtles, fish, elusive seabirds, whales, and more. It is also a sacred underwater graveyard for the **Gullah/Geechee** people, the resting place of enslaved ancestors who died on their forced travel from their homelands over the plateau during the **Middle Passage**. Dive in to explore the globally significant Blake Plateau and discover how we can protect its important sites and remarkable marine ecosystems.

This is the first in a three-part series, but can be used as a standalone lesson or as part of an extended unit on ocean science, ecosystems, or environmental geography.

Overview

What is the Blake Plateau?

The Blake Plateau is an extraordinary undersea plain of global importance, roughly 80-200 miles offshore the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida, and has been largely undisturbed for millennia.

Recent science expeditions have provided a window into this underwater world and shown a breathtaking seascape of tens of thousands of ancient deep-sea **coral mounds,** some towering hundreds of feet above the seafloor. Fueled by the **Gulf Stream**, this dynamic area is critical to the health of the region's fish and wildlife.

The Blake Plateau represents a nearly pristine and ecologically important region in the U.S. Atlantic, offering a unique chance to expand our understanding of ocean ecosystems before large-scale human activity increases. As technology advances and interest in offshore industries grows, informed decision-making becomes essential. This chapter serves as a starting point: building foundational knowledge about the Blake Plateau and why it matters.

By exploring this chapter, learners will:

- ✅ Locate and describe the Blake Plateau using maps and geographic tools
- ✅ Explain how energy and nutrients move through the ocean (marine snow)
- ✅ Explore key species living in this deep-sea environment
- ✅ Examine the role of the deep ocean in sustaining Earth's ecosystems.

Exploring the Blake Plateau content was created by EarthEcho International and reviewed for accuracy by science and conservation experts at the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).

Map It!

Exploring the geography of the Blake Plateau

During this activity, learners will use mapping and geography skills to locate the Blake Plateau and understand its geographical context.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Access to the internet
- Printed map of the Atlantic Ocean and U.S. Southeast coast
    - One for each learner or one for each group of learners (ie, pairs or small groups)
- NOAA Ocean Exploration Bathymetric Mapping Fact Sheet
- Definition & Classification System for U.S. Marine Protected Areas
- Pencil and eraser
- Ruler

INTRODUCTION: How to Read a Bathymetric Map

A map is a flat model of the Earth's surface drawn to a specific scale. Maps help us understand places that are very large or hard to see directly.

A **topographic map** shows the height of land above sea level, such as mountains and hills. A **bathymetric map** shows the depth of landforms below sea level, such as the ocean floor.
Bathymetric maps use contour lines to show depth. A contour line connects points that have the same depth. This means every point along that line is the same distance below sea level.

The pattern of contour lines helps you understand the shape of the ocean floor:

- Lines close together show a steep drop-off or slope.
- Lines far apart show a flatter area.
- Small closed circles may show the top of an underwater mountain, called a seamount.

Numbers on bathymetric maps are usually negative because they show depth below sea level. The farther the number is from zero, the deeper the water.
Colors can also help show depth. Lighter colors usually represent shallow water, while darker blues show deeper areas.

By reading contour lines, numbers, and colors on a map, scientists can understand the shape of the ocean floor without seeing it directly.

Source for additional information: *NOAA Ocean Exploration Bathymetric Mapping Fact Sheet.*

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Using the map and clues provided, you will map out the area where the Blake Plateau is located. You may be familiar with topographic maps, which describe the shape and features of land above sea level. Here, you will be using a bathymetric map, which describes the shape and shows the depth of landforms of the seafloor below the ocean surface.
2. Start by labeling all the major bodies of water you see.

   HINT: You should have at least 2 areas of the ocean labeled
3. Use the clues below to begin to map out where you believe the Blake Plateau is located. Work individually or in a small group.

   HINT: The map scale and a ruler should help you measure distances.

🔍 CLUES

- Located in the western Atlantic Ocean off the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida in the southeastern United States.
- Stretches from the Bahama Banks to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina
- 80-200 miles offshore, which is between the North American **continental shelf** and the deep ocean
- East and West: Extends about 250 kilometers (~155 miles; ~135 nautical miles)
- North and South: Extends 500 kilometers (~310 miles; ~270 nautical miles)
- Has a depth of 500 meters (1,640 feet) inshore to 2,500 meters (3,280 feet) offshore, where the Blake Escarpment drops steeply.

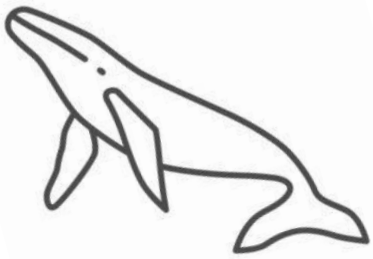
CHECK YOUR WORK!

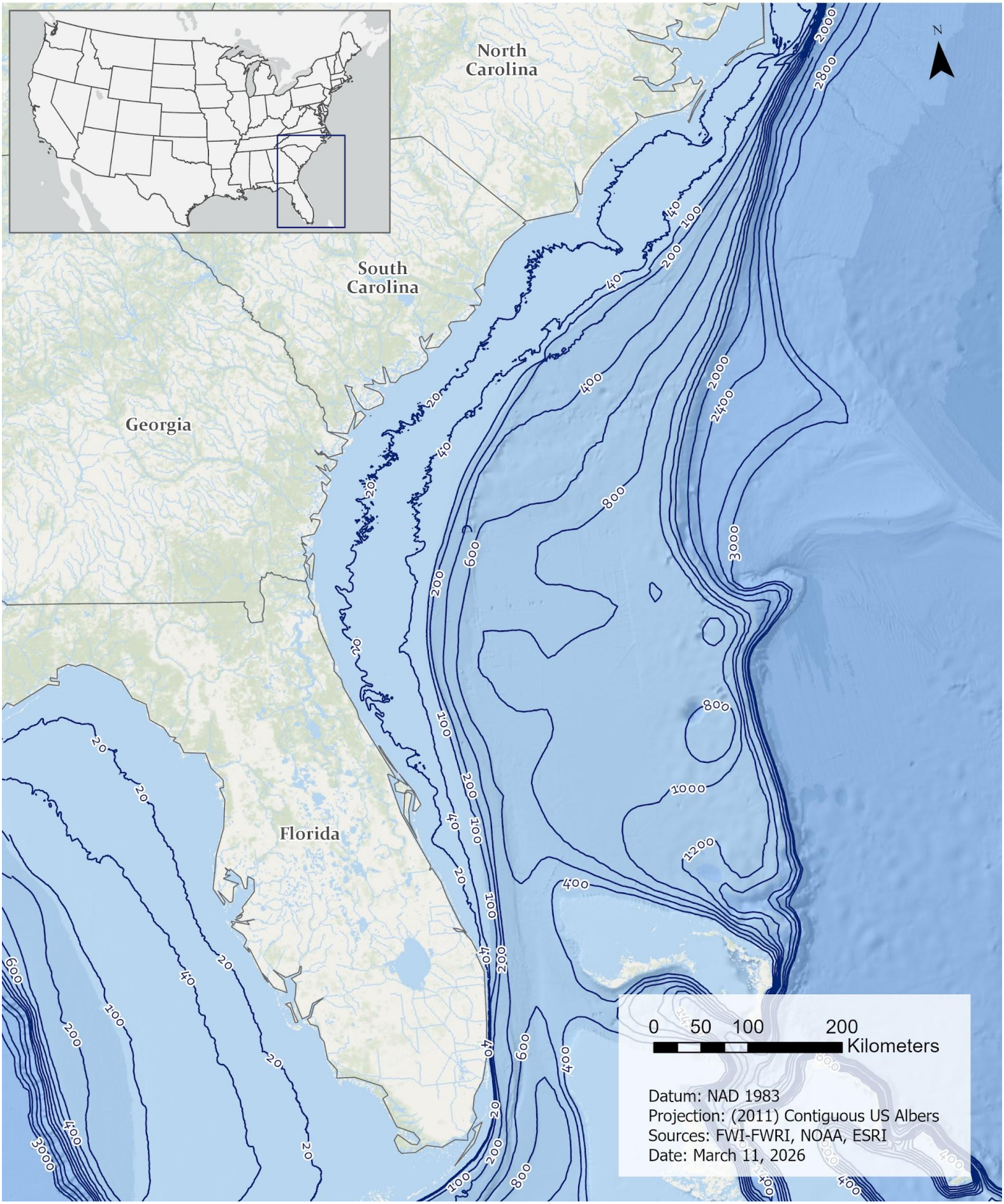
- Compare your map to others. Do they look the same? Are they different? If there are differences, why do you think that is?
- Using the NOAA MPA Inventory Interactive Map, find the Blake Plateau area and answer the following questions:
  - How does your map match up to the exact location of the Blake Plateau?
  - Are there any other nearby landmarks or waterbodies that you can mark on the map?
  - Zooming in and moving around the interactive map, do you see any areas that are protected?

    HINT: Be sure to check the key/legend for what the different colors mean and refer to the Definition & Classification System for U.S. Marine Protected Areas.
  - Where are you located in reference to the Blake Plateau?

FURTHER DISCUSSION

- What are some nearby landmarks or bodies of water close to the Blake Plateau?
- What areas near or around the Blake Plateau are protected?
- If there are protected areas, what do you see they have in common with one another?
- Are any of the existing protected areas on the Blake Plateau? How is the Blake Plateau different from the location of the existing protected areas?

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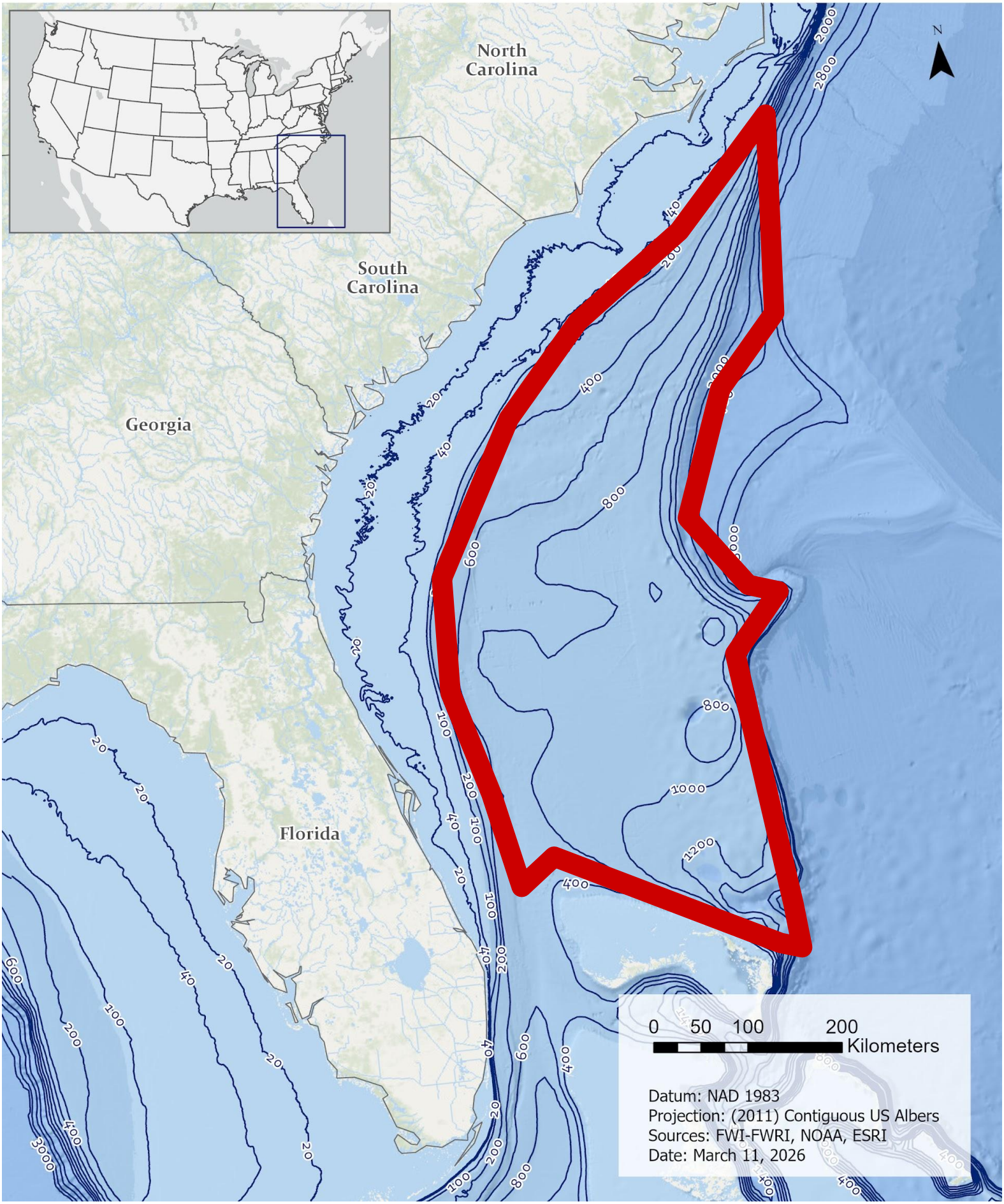
ANSWER KEY*



*NOTE: There is no exact boundary for the Blake Plateau. This answer key is for classroom reference only.

Snowfall in the Ocean

Nutrient Cycling in the Deep Sea

In this activity, learners explore how deep-sea corals survive and the importance of **nutrient cycling** in ocean ecosystems. By tracing the journey of **marine snow** from the ocean's surface to the seafloor, learners investigate how energy and nutrients move through the ocean and support life on the Blake Plateau.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Internet Access to watch the following videos (10 mins):
  - Corals: The Bottom Line (2 mins)
  - Ecosystem Services of the Blake Plateau (2 mins)
  - Deep-Dive: Million Mounds (4 mins)
  - Marine Snow: A Flurry of Organic Matter (1 min)
- Large, clear container or aquarium
- Water
- Small paper pieces, pepper, or biodegradable confetti (marine snow)
- Small sponge, cotton balls, or pipe cleaners (deep-sea corals)
- Spoon or stick (to simulate **currents**)
- *Snowfall in the Ocean* Worksheet
- Additional reference materials:
  - NOAA Ocean Exploration *Rainforests of the Deep* fact sheet
  - NOAA Ocean Exploration *Deep Sea Corals* fact sheet

INTRODUCTION

Corals are animals that live in colonies and build reef structures that provide habitat for many marine species. Corals capture food using small tentacles that can catch **zooplankton** and tiny fish drifting in the water, much like their relatives, sea anemones and jellies.

Coral reefs are often called the "rainforests of the ocean" because they provide habitat for many different species. Coral reef ecosystems can form in shallow waters and in the deep sea. Both types are important habitats for marine life, but they are found in very different environments. Shallow-water coral reefs need sunlight, while deep-sea reefs live in complete darkness.

Shallow-Water Corals

Shallow-water coral reefs grow in warm, sunlit waters, usually less than 45 meters (150 feet) deep. Many of these corals have a special partnership with tiny algae called **zooxanthellae** that live inside their tissues. This partnership is a great example of a symbiotic relationship, a close, often long-term interaction between two different species living together, where they may depend on one another for survival.

The algae use sunlight to make energy through **photosynthesis**, and some of that energy is shared with the coral. This relationship helps shallow-water corals grow quickly and build large reef structures. However, shallow corals still capture zooplankton and small fish from the water as an additional food source.

Corals: The Bottom Line

Deep-Sea Corals

Deep-sea coral reefs grow in cold, dark waters where sunlight cannot reach. These reefs can begin at depths deeper than 46 meters (150+ feet) and extend thousands of meters below the surface.

Because there is no sunlight in the deep sea, deep-sea corals do not have zooxanthellae and cannot rely on photosynthesis. They also do not use **chemosynthesis**, a process used by some deep-sea organisms near hydrothermal vents.

Instead, deep-sea corals depend on food drifting down from the ocean's surface. This material is called marine snow. Marine snow is made of tiny particles of organic matter, including dead plankton, waste, and fragments of plants and animals. These particles slowly sink through the water column toward the seafloor.

Ecosystem Services of the Blake Plateau

The Blake Plateau is home to rich coral habitats featuring black corals, sea fans, and deep-sea coral species such as ***Lophelia pertusa*** (also known as *Desmophyllum pertusum*), which is a ghostly white. The Lophelia corals form "mounds" and grow slowly and in complete darkness over tens of thousands of years, supporting a diverse community of wildlife, including close to 100 species of fish.

Deep Dive: Million Mounds

From Organic Matter to Nutrients

Marine snow itself is not a nutrient. Instead, it is organic material (i.e., dead plants and animals) that contains energy in the form of chemical bonds and elements such as carbon, **nitrogen**, and phosphorus. When marine snow reaches the deep ocean, bacteria and other organisms break it down. This process releases nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus into the surrounding water.

Deep-sea corals capture some of this organic matter as food. As they feed and process this material, they help recycle nutrients within the ecosystem. Ocean currents such as the **Gulf Stream** move these nutrients through the water column, supporting marine life both deep in the ocean and closer to the surface.

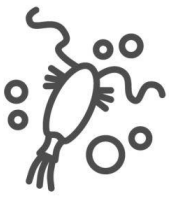
Marine Snow: A Flurry of Organic Matter

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Think about this question and discuss: *If there is no sunlight in the deep ocean, how do animals living there get food?*
2. Build an ocean model using the supplies provided.
    - First, fill the container with water. The surface layer represents sunlit waters where plankton grow. The bottom layer represents the deep ocean floor.
    - Place sponges and/or pipe cleaners at the bottom. These represent deep-sea coral colonies.
3. Sprinkle the small particles onto the water's surface.
4. Observe how the particles slowly sink.
5. Using the spoon or stick, gently stir the water to represent ocean currents.
6. Observe how currents change the path of marine snow.
7. Observe how some particles reach the "corals."
8. Complete the *Snowfall in the Ocean* Worksheet

FURTHER DISCUSSION

- How does marine snow connect life at the ocean's surface to life in the deep sea?
- Why is marine snow important for deep-sea corals?
- Why might changes in surface ocean ecosystems affect deep-sea coral reefs?
- What does the journey of marine snow tell us about how different parts of the ocean are connected?






Snowfall in the Ocean Worksheet

Using the Word Bank, fill in the missing steps showing how energy and nutrients move through the ocean. *HINT: You will use one word twice.*

WORD BANK:

phytoplankton marine snow zooplankton nutrients currents

Sunlight helps _____ grow near the ocean surface.

Dead organisms and waste sink downward as _____ _____.

Deep-sea corals capture food such as _____ .

Bacteria break down organic matter and release important _____ such as nitrogen and phosphorus.

Ocean _____ move these nutrients through the ocean where they support new life.

The nutrients help _____ grow again near the surface.

ANSWER KEY

Snowfall in the Ocean Worksheet

Using the Word Bank, fill in the missing steps showing how energy and nutrients move through the ocean. *HINT: You will use one word twice.*

WORD BANK:

phytoplankton marine snow zooplankton nutrients currents

Sunlight helps **phytoplankton** grow near the ocean surface.

Dead organisms and waste sink downward as **marine snow**.

Deep-sea corals capture food such as **zooplankton** .

Bacteria break down organic matter and release important **nutrients** such as nitrogen and phosphorus.

Ocean **currents** move these nutrients through the ocean where they support new life.

The nutrients help **phytoplankton** grow again near the surface.

For Teachers

Learning Objectives, Tips, Standards Alignment, Key Terms, and References

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, learners will be able to:

- Locate and describe the Blake Plateau using geographic tools and maps.
- Differentiate between shallow-water coral reefs and deep-sea coral reefs in terms of structure, function, and environmental conditions.
- Identify and explain how energy and nutrients move through marine ecosystems, including the role of marine snow in connecting surface and deep-sea life.
- Recognize the ecological significance of the Blake Plateau region.
- Develop awareness of how ocean systems are interconnected and why protecting deep-sea habitats is vital for global ocean health.

TEACHER TIPS + INSTRUCTIONAL NOTES

1. Setting the Scene
   - Begin with the Introduction Video (NOAA/Okeanos Explorer footage) to spark curiosity.
   - Invite students to make quick "I notice, I wonder" observations about what they see.
2. Integrating Geography & Inquiry Skills
   - In the *MAP IT!* activity, scaffold the use of map scales and coordinates.
   - Encourage students to hypothesize the plateau's boundaries before verifying with NOAA's interactive map.
   - For a deeper understanding of the various levels of marine protection, review The MPA Guide: A framework to achieve global goals for the ocean.
3. Systems Thinking Extension
   - During the *SNOWFALL* activity, have students diagram energy flow: surface plankton → marine snow → deep-sea corals.
   - Discuss how disruptions at one level affect the entire system.
4. Differentiation Ideas
   - Visual learners: Use videos, maps, and infographics.
   - Kinesthetic learners: Create a "living food web" with strings connecting different ocean roles.

TEACHER TIPS + INSTRUCTIONAL NOTES, CONT.

5. Reflection & Assessment
   - Exit Ticket: "What's one new thing you learned about the deep ocean that surprised you?"
6. Go Further
   - If you have more time, we encourage you to explore additional resources and activities from NOAA:
   - Student Investigation: Laying the Foundation for Deep-Sea Coral Gardens
   - Student Investigation: Feeding the Million Mounds of Deep-Sea Coral

EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS ADDRESSED

Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)

Disciplinary Core Ideas (Grades 6–8, 9–12):

MS-LS2-1: Analyze and interpret data to provide evidence for the effects of resource availability on organisms and populations in an ecosystem.

MS-LS2-3: Develop a model to describe the cycling of matter and flow of energy among living and nonliving parts of an ecosystem.

HS-ESS3-1: Construct an explanation based on evidence for how natural resources and human activity affect Earth's systems.

HS-ESS3-4: Evaluate or refine a technological solution that reduces impacts of human activities on natural systems.

Science & Engineering Practices:
- Analyzing and interpreting data
- Developing and using models
- Constructing explanations
- Engaging in argument from evidence

Crosscutting Concepts:
- Systems and system models
- Cause and effect
- Energy and matter: Flows, Cycles, and Conservation

EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS ADDRESSED, CONT.

Ocean Literacy Principles

#1: The Earth has one big ocean with many features.

#5: The ocean supports a great diversity of life and ecosystems.

#6: The ocean and humans are inextricably interconnected.

#7: The ocean is largely unexplored.

C3 Framework for Social Studies (Geography Strand)

D2.Geo.2.6-8: Use maps and other geographic representations to explain spatial patterns of cultural and environmental characteristics.

D2.Geo.4.6–8: Explain how cultural and environmental characteristics influence the distribution of populations and ecosystems.

D2.Geo.5.6-8: Explain how human settlement and movement relate to the locations and use of various natural resources.

D2.Geo.7.6–8: Explain how changes in environmental conditions affect ecosystems.

D2.Geo.8.9-12: Evaluate the consequences of human-made and natural changes to Earth's surface.

Common Core ELA Connections

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.6–8.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of science texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.6–8.2 Determine the central ideas of a scientific text and summarize key concepts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.6-8.7: Integrate quantitative or technical information expressed in words in a text with a version of that information expressed visually.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1 Engage effectively in collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information clearly.

VOCABULARY + KEY TERMS

Bathymetry The study and measurement of the depth and shape of the ocean floor.

Bathymetric map A map that shows the depths of landforms below sea level.

Biodiversity The variety of living organisms within a given ecosystem, habitat, or the entire Earth.

Blake Plateau A wide, flat underwater plain about 80–100 miles off the southeastern U.S. coast that is home to the world's largest deep-sea coral reef system.

Chemosynthesis The process by which food is made by bacteria or other living things using chemicals as the energy source, typically in the absence of sunlight.

Continental Shelf The gently sloping area of the seabed that extends from a continent before dropping into the deep ocean.

Coral Mounds Large, mound-shaped structures built over time by layers of deep-sea coral skeletons.

Currents The continuous, directed, and cohesive motion of seawater.

Deep-Sea Coral Coral species that live in dark, cold waters at depths of 46–3,048 meters (150-10,000 feet), forming complex reef structures without sunlight.

Ecosystem Services Benefits humans receive from ecosystems, such as oxygen production, food supply, and climate regulation.

Gulf Stream A warm ocean current that flows north along the U.S. East Coast and carries heat and nutrients across the Atlantic Ocean.

Gullah/Geechee Descendants of West and Central Africans who were enslaved and brought to the southeastern U.S. coast; they have a rich cultural heritage linked to the Atlantic Ocean.

Industrialization of the Ocean Expansion of human activities (e.g., mining, drilling, shipping) into previously undisturbed ocean areas.

***Lophelia pertusa* (aka *Desmophyllum pertusum*)** A primary deep-sea coral species found on the Blake Plateau.

Marine Protected Area (MPA) A designated region of the ocean where human activities are regulated to conserve ecosystems and cultural resources.

VOCABULARY + KEY TERMS, CONT.

Marine Snow Tiny bits of organic material, such as dead plankton and waste, that slowly drift from surface waters to the deep sea, providing food for deep-sea life.

Middle Passage The route across the Atlantic Ocean by which enslaved Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas from the 1500s to the 1800s.

National Marine Sanctuary Special areas that protect important marine ecosystems around the nation. Some sanctuaries are breeding and feeding grounds for endangered whales, others contain thriving coral reefs or kelp forests, and many are home to historic shipwrecks and other archaeological treasures. National Marine Sanctuaries are managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Nitrate A nutrient that contains nitrogen and helps plants and algae grow; too much can cause pollution in marine environments.

Nitrogen An essential element for all life forms but, in seawater, nitrogen mostly occurs as inert dissolved N2 gas (more than 95%) that is inaccessible to most species.

Nutrient Cycling The movement and exchange of organic and inorganic matter back into the production of living matter.

Photosynthesis The process by which green plants and some other organisms use sunlight to synthesize foods from carbon dioxide and water.

Phytoplankton Microscopic, single-celled, plant-like organisms (algae and bacteria) that live in the upper, sunlit layer of oceans and freshwater bodies

Plateau A large, flat or gently sloping elevated area that stands higher than the surrounding land or seafloor.

Polyp The basic living unit of class Anthozoa (further subdivided into subclass Hexacorallia, which includes stony corals, and subclass Octocorallia, which includes soft corals). Polyps can occur either singularly, as in the case of anemones and some stony corals, or can form colonies, as they do in most stony and all soft corals.

Ridges Long, narrow raised areas on the ocean floor, often formed by movement of Earth's tectonic plates.

Scarps Steep slopes or cliffs found where the seafloor drops sharply, such as at the edge of the Blake Plateau.

VOCABULARY + KEY TERMS, CONT.

Shallow-Water Coral Reef Coral ecosystems found in shallow and warm subtropical and tropical seas (typically 0–45 meters deep) that rely on symbiotic algae for energy.

Symbiosis A mutually beneficial relationship between different organisms (e.g., corals and zooxanthellae).

Topography The shape of the land, encompassing the physical features of an area, such as hills, valleys, and rivers.

Topographic map A map that shows the elevation of landforms above sea level.

Zooplankton Tiny, often microscopic, animals that drift with the ocean's currents.

Zooxanthellae Photosynthetic algae living within coral tissues that provide energy through photosynthesis.

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