

**UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS**  
**Aerial Drones or Quadcopters**  
*A Statement from the MBNMS Superintendent*

The use of unmanned aircraft systems, also known as aerial drones or quadcopters, has markedly increased in Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary (MBNMS) during the past year. It is important for operators to know that these aerial vehicles are regulated above the waters of the marine sanctuary. In many coastal waters, they are not allowed at all.

Drones and piloted aircraft flying at low altitude over beaches and the ocean disturb and frighten wildlife, especially sensitive animals like seals, sea otters, seabirds and shorebirds. For this reason, four overflight restriction zones were established in the sanctuary by the federal government in 1992 to protect marine life from aerial disturbance. Motorized aircraft, including model aircraft and drones, must remain above 1000 feet altitude if they fly over any of these four designated overflight zones. Since the Federal Aviation Administration has determined that model aircraft and recreational drones cannot exceed an altitude of 400 feet within U.S. airspace, this means their use in these zones is illegal under all circumstances.

The four restricted zones include coastal waters from the mean high tide line up to five nautical miles offshore, and encompass a wide band of sanctuary coastal waters: 1) from the north end of Pescadero Marsh south to Point Santa Cruz; 2) from the Carmel River mouth south to Cambria; 3) from the Sunset State Beach parking lot south to the CEMEX Sand Plant, Marina; and 4) over the main channel of Elkhorn Slough.

Both within and outside of the overflight restriction zones, sanctuary regulations and other federal laws prohibit harassment of marine mammals, turtles and birds by any means, including disturbance from the air. Therefore, operators who fly drones outside the overflight restriction zones should still be careful not to disturb these animals if they are present.

Both traditional and remotely controlled aircraft (including model aircraft and drones) pose a special threat to marine life because they can easily access areas normally free of human presence. Appearing suddenly they can cause disturbance through sight, sound and movement. Wildlife often react by fleeing quickly, or if they remain behind, stay on high alert to guard against a return of the perceived threat. Such disturbances can create stress and can significantly affect an animal's health, particularly those that are pregnant or raising young.

Severe or repeated disturbance of wildlife can interrupt feeding and rest, resulting in weight loss, fatigue, sickness and even death. A sudden disturbance that flushes animals off rookeries or nesting colonies can directly injure or cause mortality to eggs and young animals as adults scramble in panic. It can also cause indirect injury by exposing eggs and young animals to cold, heat, predators, dehydration, starvation and stress during the absence of adult protectors.

I urge all sanctuary users to help protect sanctuary wildlife by understanding and adhering to these sanctuary regulations and by reporting marine mammal or seabird disturbance to the NOAA Enforcement Hotline at [1-800-853-1964](tel:1-800-853-1964). For more information about overflight regulations within MBNMS visit: <http://montereybay.noaa.gov/resourcepro/resmanissues/aircraft.html>.

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Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary  
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