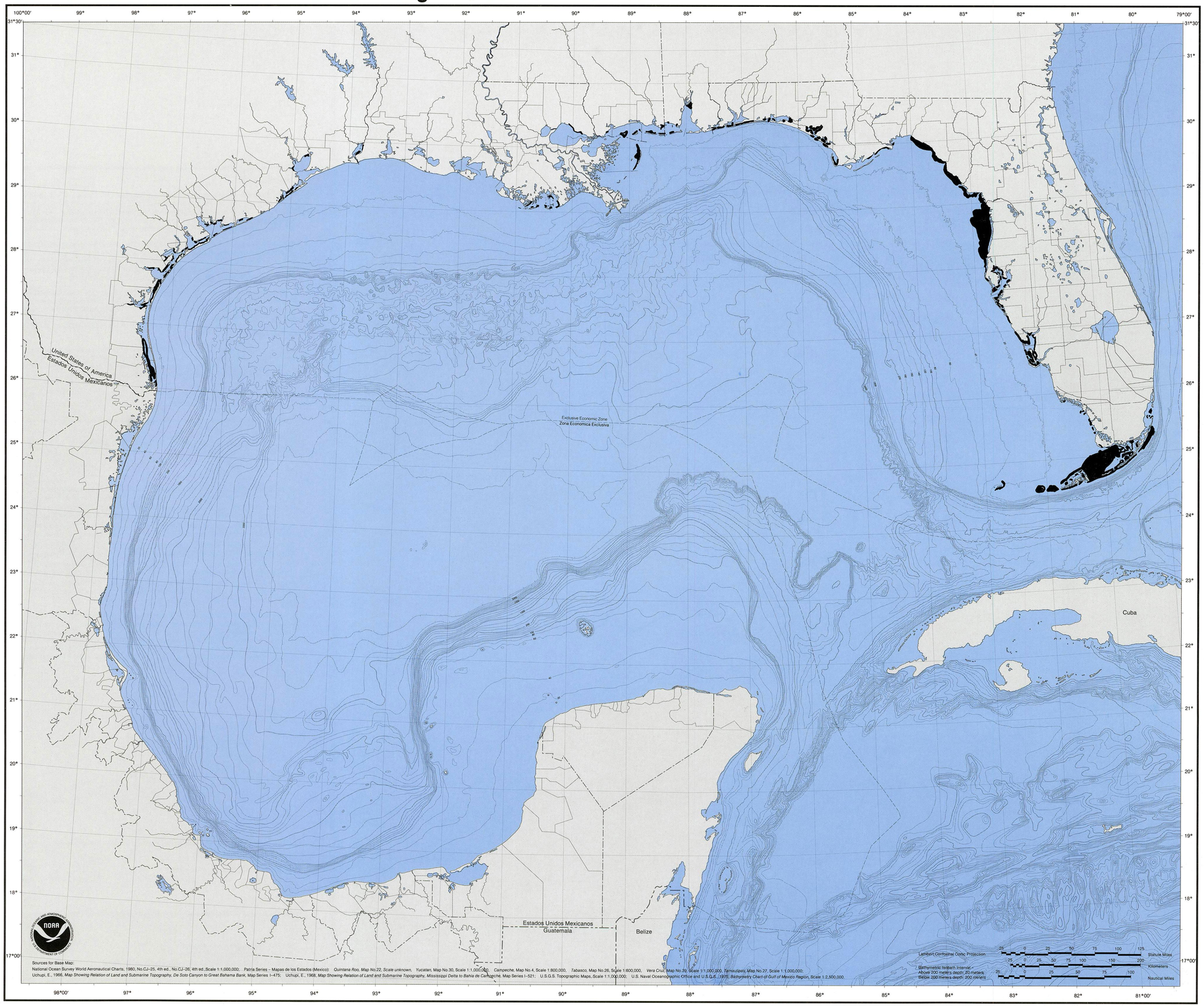

Seagrasses

Description

Seagrasses or anthophytes are flowering marine plants that grow completely submerged in seawater. Most seagrasses are anchored to soft sediments or rocks by horizontal rootlike structures called rhizomes, from which the dense masses of grasslike shoots of the plant develop to form thick beds of submerged vegetation (Sumich, 1980).

Most of the world's 45 species of seagrasses grow in the tropics and subtropics. The most abundant seagrass species in the Gulf of Mexico is turtlegrass. Other species found in the Gulf are manatee grass, shoal grass, widgeon grass, and two species of Halophila (Zieman, 1982).

Fluctuations in salinity, turbidity, and water temperature are detrimental to seagrass beds. The continuous distribution of seagrass around the periphery of the eastern Gulf is interrupted between Mississippi Sound and Galveston Bay by the effects of low salinity and turbidity of the Mississippi River discharge.

Seagrass beds function as: 1) sediment traps and stabilizers of bottom sediments; 2) direct food sources for sea urchins, sea turtles, manatees, and certain herbivorous fishes; 3) a refuge and source of food organisms for juveniles of many commercially important species such as shrimp, crabs, scallops, and fishes; 4) habitat for groups of invertebrate species that grow attached to the leaves; and 5) substrate for epiphytic algae (Jones, Ring, and Smith, 1973).

Seagrasses have not been extensively studied in the Gulf of Mexico. The distribution shown on this map represents the best known and comprehensive estimate of their location throughout the Gulf of Mexico.

Area Inhabited by Seagrasses

No data are available for Mexican waters.

References

US DOI, FWS, Gulf Coast Ecological Inventory, 1982.

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