

U.S. Coral Reef Task Force Framework for Action

Healthy coral reefs are among the most biologically diverse and economically valuable ecosystems on earth. The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force (USCRTF) recognizes the urgent need for action to address the state of coral reef management and science, and to reduce threats to coral reef ecosystem health to make reefs more resilient in the face of climate change.

In the United States and around the world, coral reef ecosystems provide economic and environmental benefits worth billions of dollars in the form of food, jobs, natural products, recreation, and shoreline protection. The beauty and biodiversity of coral reefs attract millions of tourists making tourism the top industry in many coral reef areas. With 10.5 million people living adjacent to a U.S. coral reef in mainland coastal communities or on islands (U.S. Census 2002), coral reefs are an integral part of the culture, heritage, and economies of these regions. With effective management, healthy reef ecosystems can continue to provide these valuable services to current and future generations.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found that increasing atmospheric greenhouse gases are linked to rising global temperatures and ocean acidification. Both of these factors have important consequences for coral reefs. The Group of Eight (G8) and leaders of the Major Economies agree that the deteriorating effects of greenhouse gas emissions on the environment require cutting emissions to rein in global warming. Science is clear that coral reefs can exhibit greater resilience to climate change when not impacted by other chronic stress factors such as illegal fishing and deteriorating water quality.

It is clear that the USCRTF, with partners, must significantly increase our collective effort to address the factors over which we can exercise control. The USCRTF must take immediate action to respond to these threats and, in turn, seek to sustain our coral reef ecosystems and the communities that depend upon them.

Coral reefs are teetering on the edge of survival. Adverse effects of fishing, pollution, coastal development, and physical damage further undermine reef health, and consequently, that of the people and ecosystems depending upon them. High levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have produced a lethal combination of hotter and more acidic seawater.

Science has demonstrated that reef communities can recover when they are protected and stressors are removed. Urgent action is needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In the meantime, precious time for coral reef ecosystems can be secured through increased protection from land and marine pollution, unsustainable fishing, development, and other stressors, all of which we know can damage coral health. The time to act is now.