

Meeting Highlights
U.S. Coral Reef Task Force Meeting
October 2006
U.S. Virgin Islands

Full meeting summary and meeting materials (agendas, presentations, etc) are available on the Task Force web site (www.coralreef.gov). For more information contact Beth Dieveney (beth.dieveney@noaa.gov; 301-713-2989 x 200) or Roger Griffis (roger.b.griffis@noaa.gov; 301-713-2989 x 115).

General Summary

The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force held a public meeting in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands October 24 – 28, 2006. The purpose of the meeting was to learn about and take action on key issues related to coral reef conservation in the Caribbean. The Meeting also provided an opportunity for Task Force Members to share recent accomplishments, existing challenges, and needs in addressing coral reef research and conservation issues globally.

- The Task Force heard from leading experts on coral diseases, coral bleaching, the state of domestic and international coral reef ecosystems, scientific research, and additional tools utilized to better understand and conserve coral reef ecosystems.
- Several updates were provided, including the Endangered Species Act listing of *Acropora* corals as threatened, the Enforcement Working Group, the International Year of the Reef, and the All Islands Committee.
- Reports were given on the International Tropical Marine Ecosystem Management Symposium, International Coral Reef Initiative and Local Action Strategies.
- The Task Force discussed and acted on eleven key **decision items** listed below (full text of Decision Items can be found at www.coralreef.gov).
- During the Meeting, the Task Force also gave a number of **awards** to several local, regional, and national organizations and individuals in recognition of their significant contributions to coral reef science and management.
- **Public comment** was heard from seven individuals and organizations.
- Seven **workshops** were held in conjunction with the U.S. Coral Reef Task force meeting on October 24th and October 28. Workshops included: Tools for Responding to Injury Events in Coral Reefs; Acropora Management Update; USVI Coral Management Issues; Sustainable Tourism; A Reef Manager's Guide to Bleaching; TNC Caribbean Decision Support System; and Grant Writing Skills. A summary of each workshop can be found at www.coralreef.gov.

Steering Committee Action on Coral Diseases

In response to a request made by the Task Force meeting in May 2006, Dr. Cheryl Woodley from the Coral Disease and Health Consortium provided the Task Force with an overview of priority issues and associated recommendations on coral disease. Issues included: a lack of understanding of basic coral biology; the inhibited ability to manage growing coral health problems; the disconnect between science and management; the perception that options do not exist for managing disease; lack of adequate tools to

manage coral disease outbreaks; and the critical need to build scientific capacity. Recommendations to address these issues included finding innovative ways, such as partnering with other agencies, to fund and carry out scientific studies on coral disease; support coral reef management with scientific data; take simple steps to manage coral disease such as encouraging good hygiene and improved sanitary practices among divers and users of the ocean environment; and to provide opportunities to educate the next generation of scientists.

The Task Force requested that the Coral Disease and Health consortium develop and coordinate strategies to address coral disease issues and serve as the official Coral Disease Working Group for the Task Force.

International Report: International Tropical Marine Ecosystem Management Symposium, International Coral Reef Initiative

The Task Force heard a report on the third International Tropical Marine Ecosystem Management Symposium (ITMEMS) held this year in Cozumel, Mexico, October 16-20. The meeting was attended by over 300 participants from 45 nations and included managers, scientists, local and national governmental representatives, funders, and private sector representatives. Workshops were held on 13 priority issues in coral reef management. Over 400 recommendations were made outlining priority actions for the next 5-10 years to address the 13 identified priority issues. Core action areas included integrating coastal management, capacity building, research and monitoring, and performance review and evaluation. There was also strong support voiced during the meeting for 2008 International Year of the Reef and the International Coral Reef Symposium.

International Year of the Reef

Alissa Barron, NOAA, provided an update on the International Year of the Reef (IYOR). The primary goal of the IYOR is to raise global awareness of the value of coral reefs and the challenges they face. Key Events in 2008 include: U.S. and Mexico will serve as co-chairs of ICRI Secretariat from 2007 to 2009; 10th Anniversaries of the establishment of the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network, Reef Check network, and the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force; International Coral Reef Symposium (ICRS) is planned for July 2008; Global and U.S. 'State of Reef' reports will be released; and the Smithsonian Oceans Hall Coral Reef Exhibit will open. A side meeting on IYOR was held October 26 where a detailed update was provided on IYOR efforts and a proposed outline of a U.S. IYOR Plan of Action was discussed.

The Task Force committed to support planning and implementation of the 2008 International Year of the Reef.

Update and Next Steps: Endangered Species Listed *Acropora* Corals

Jennifer Moore, NOAA fisheries Southeast Regional Office, provided an update and next steps regarding the May 9, 2006 listing of two species of *Acropora* as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Jennifer outlined the various “tools” afforded by the ESA listing, focusing especially on the next steps in implementing the 4(d) rule (including defining prohibitions and “take,” and providing exemptions), the responsibilities of Federal agencies to consult under Section 7, critical habitat designation, Section 6 funding, and recovery planning.

Responding to Coral Bleaching Events

Jeff Miller, National Park Service, and Caroline Rogers, U.S. Geological Survey, provided an overview of the 2005 Caribbean coral bleaching report. A major coral bleaching event occurred in the Caribbean in mid- to late-2005, which resulted in the loss of 35% of coral in much of the region, and corals are continuing to decline. Threatened elkhorn was also significantly effected with bleaching occurring on approximately 45% of colonies in the region, 25% of which recovered. Some of the lessons learned from this event include the need for a well-designed monitoring program in place *before* events takes place and increased monitoring frequency. Suggested research and management priorities were provided.

Billy Causey, Superintendent of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Andrew Skeat, Executive Director of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority presented “A Reef Manager’s Guide to Coral Bleaching.” The Reef Manager’s Guide provides information on the causes and consequences of coral bleaching, management strategies to help local and regional reef managers reduce this threat, and case studies from a variety of coral reef ecosystems. Produced by NOAA, the Australian Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), and The World Conservation Union (IUCN), the Reef Manager’s Guide includes contributions from over 50 experts in coral bleaching and coral reef management from 30 organizations.

Mark Eakin, NOAA Coral Reef Watch, described the potential impacts of ocean acidification on coral reefs. Conclusions include that ocean acidification is a growing problem and it will be significant for reef corals within a few decades. Studies and monitoring are needed now to understand impacts of ocean acidification. A report, “Impacts of Ocean Acidification on Coral Reefs and Other Marine Calcifiers” was released in June 2006 from a workshop sponsored by NSF, NOAA, and USGS.

The Task Force reiterated its support for development of Local Action Strategies and other tools and plans to minimize the impacts of coral bleaching and climate change on coral reef ecosystems, and endorsed the use of “A Reef Manager’s guide to Coral Bleaching” and other tools to develop plans for responding to coral bleaching.

Keynote Presentation: The Changing State of Caribbean Coral Reef Ecosystems

Jeremy Jackson of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography provided the Task force with a historical perspective of coral reef ecosystems in the Caribbean. Jeremy highlighted

many of the species that have declined since the Caribbean was settled, the major causes of degradation then and now, the implications of restoring coral reef ecosystems, and the relative effectiveness of marine protected areas. Jackson concluded that protection works on appropriately large spatial and temporal scales, that more intact food webs and stronger top-down control provide greater resilience in the face of global change, and that strong local protection can make a big difference for the future of coral reefs. Jackson warned, however, that destruction is occurring faster than recovery, and there are uncertainties of the outcome of conservation. He encouraged scientists and managers to think more about conducting management experiments in the hopes that taking risks may lead to conservation breakthroughs.

State of Domestic U.S. Caribbean Coral Reef Ecosystems

The Task Force heard a moderated discussion of key issues and challenges facing domestic coral reef ecosystems and solutions and opportunities implemented and available through local and federal means. This session included presentations on the following:

- Maritime Industry Impacts on Coral Reefs: Challenges & Solutions in Southeast Florida- *Chantal Collier, Florida Department of Environmental Protection*
- An overview of workshop on USVI MPA effectiveness- *Paige Rothernberger, VI Department of Planning & Natural Resources*
- Coral Reef Projects in Puerto Rico- *Aida Rosario, Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources*

Presenters provided updates on coral reef challenges and opportunities in Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Discussion followed with a group of eight expert panelists focused on the importance of cooperative conservation initiatives in bringing stakeholders and managers together to overcome management challenges. Market based approaches, highlighting the importance of coral ecosystems to tourist driven industries, are also essential. The panelists agreed that there is a critical need to effectively communicate about the threats to coral reefs and opportunities for conservation. Panelists also emphasized the need to strengthen enforcement activities. The Task Force suggested revisiting this topic at the next meeting, with a special focus on how to bring market-based solutions to coral reef conservation.

All Islands Committee Update

Lelei Peau, Chair, All Islands Secretariat Co-Chair, provided an update on developments and recommendations from the All Islands Committee. Development has begun on a website for the Committee to improve communication, which is scheduled to be launched in December 2006. The Committee is also in the process of drafting a new strategic plan and charter, which will be finalized by early 2007. Several recommendations were made to the Task Force. Highlights include recommendations to: increase funding for jurisdictional projects; encourage more active engagement by all federal agencies in the implementation of each jurisdiction's coral reef management priorities; provide workshops and trainings for coral reef managers, facilitate assistance to the Freely

Associated States to respond to major coral reef injury events when requested, and to consider an amendment to the Task Force's National Action Plan to support efforts to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.

The Task Force Charged the Steering Committee to review and develop responses to the All Islands Committee recommendations.

State of International Caribbean Coral Reef Ecosystems

This session included a panel discussion and presentations on the following:

- *Barbados*- Maria Pena
- *Netherlands Antilles Coral Reef Initiative* – Paul Hoetjes
- *Grenada*- Spencer Thomas

The Task force heard highlights of international coral reef conservation management programs and initiatives. Presentations included lessons learned from case studies of people-centered approaches to coral reef management; cooperative efforts taking place through the Netherlands Antilles Coral Reef Initiative; and a case study of conservation efforts in Grenada. Discussion focused on how to implement user fees in marine protected areas and challenges in enforcing regulations in marine protected areas.

Micronesian Challenge Update

Trina Leberer, the Nature Conservancy provided an update on the Micronesian Challenge. Highlights include the following: an Action Planning Meeting will be held in Palau from December 4-7, 2006, where a financial assistance proposal will be crafted; jurisdictional meetings will be held to prepare for the regional planning meeting; and a Regional support team meeting will be held in Guam in August 2006.

Pacific Islands MPA Community Update-

The Task Force heard an update on the Pacific Islands MPA Marine community. The Pacific Islands Marine Protected Areas Community (PIMPAC) is a collaboration of marine protected area (MPA) managers, non-governmental organizations, local communities, federal, state, and territorial agencies, and other stakeholders working together to collectively enhance the effective use and management of MPAs in the U.S. Pacific Islands and Freely Associated States. Specifically, PIMPAC aims to build partnerships among Pacific Island MPA practitioners and to bring support to the region in order to strengthen MPA planning, management, and evaluation efforts and conserving the marine resources of the Pacific Islands. The Task Force expressed interest in forming a similar initiative in the Caribbean. A suggestion was made to work with the State Department to broaden participation to other nations either directly in the Task Force, in the PIMPAC or a similar initiative, or through other partnership efforts.

Task Force member updates

Highlights of member updates included:

- Governor Togiola Tulafono, Samoa: The Governor urged the Task Force to undertake a review of LASs to develop guidance for the future and asked that the Task Force consider devising a system of peer review and direct the majority of funding to local efforts. The Governor also announced that support is being sought for territorial marine lab in Samoa.
- Bob Ballard, Florida: A new web site will be launched next month about reefs off the coast of Florida (www.southeastfloridareef.net). Governor Bush has set aside purchase land on the Florida Keys. There are also plans to work towards designating the waters off of Dade, Brower and Palm Beach counties as an aquatic preserve.
- Bonnie Thie, EPA: The EPA is implementing cooperative conservation through a national estuary program, San Juan Bay Estuary Program, which is addressing land based sources of pollution.
- Vangie Lujan, Guam: Guam is working with DOD and other Federal partners to reduce some of the impacts of population expansion due to greater military presence. Guam will use conservation action planning tool in addressing LAS projects, which will be useful in monitoring and evaluating the success of projects.
- Katie Moore, Department of Homeland Security U.S. Coast Guard: In the spring of 2006, the Coast Guard was involved in a marine debris removal at Midway Atoll. The Coast Guard will work with NOAA to ensure enforcement of *Acropora* and take restrictions. There are also plans to provide aircraft for deterrence and AIS to serve as a tool to help with coral reef enforcement activities.
- Althline Clark, Hawaii: On June 15th 2006 a new Marine National Monument was designated in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands; a LAS was just completed on climate change and disease; and a new Community Guidebook for local coastal management was recently developed and will be available on the web soon.
- Tom Egeland, Department of Defense, Navy: The Navy is currently working in Apra Harbor, Guam, to collect invertebrates from areas of maintenance dredging and recently sponsored a coral transportation experiment.
- Fabian Iyar, Republic of Palau: Progress is being made on Palau's protected areas network and the first site will be designated by the end of the year. The first international book with Japan on coral reefs of Palau is also in the process of being published.
- Aida Rosario, Puerto Rico: A workshop was recently held in Puerto Rico on area-wide planning that was attended by non-governmental, state, and Federal representatives. A group has been also been recently formed that will be in charge of responding to grounding events.
- Liane Guild, NASA: An Assessment was recently provided by NASA on the 2005 Caribbean Coral Reef Bleaching Event using remote sensing technology.

- Bill Roaring, U.S. Virgin Islands: Progress is being made on various LASs, including working closely with NOAA to conduct research on overfishing and to develop a monitoring project for lobster and other species in the Virgin Islands.
- Howard Hankin, USDA NRCS: A conservation effects assessment project continues to be a priority. USDA is looking for additional partners to be involved in the project.
- Fran Castro, Northern Mariana Islands: LAS projects are being implemented in the Islands. Support is requested for developing a financing strategy for the Micronesian Challenge.
- Marion Henry, Federated States of Micronesia: The First Federated States of Micronesia Environmental Conference was held in October, 2006 and Steps are being taken to implement a Federated States of Micronesia Protected Areas Network
- Tim Keeney, NOAA: NOAA is calling for grants for the Coral Reef Conservation Program and the coral reef conservation fund. NOAA is also looking for additional support for the coral fellowship program.
- Kameran Onley, DOI: The Trust for Public Land agreed to purchase land adjacent to Maho Bay in St. John USVI. December 1st marks the anniversary for St. John National Park. Since 2003, Office of Insular Affairs has contributed 13.7 million dollars to improve wastewater on St. Thomas.

Decision Items Summary

The Task Force committed to do the following:

- Establish a new Working Group on Cooperative Conservation to help build public-private partnerships for coral reef conservation.
- Participate in preparing a report "The State of coral Reef Ecosystems of the United States and Freely Associated States."
- Endorse plans to complete a progress report on Implementation of the U.s. National coral Reef Action Strategy 2004-2006.
- Support planning and implementation of the 2008 International year of the Reef.
- Support planning and implementation of the 2008 International Coral Reef Symposium.
- Request that the Coral Disease and Health Consortium develop and coordinate strategies to address coral disease issues.
- Establish a new working group to coordinate actions regarding tools for responding to major injury events to coral reef habitat.
- Support development and implementation of response plans to coral bleaching.
- Support recommendations from the Status of USVI Coral Reef Ecosystem Workshop.

The Task force deferred the following decision item until the next meeting:

- Explore opportunities related to carbon sequestration to reduce impacts of climate change on coral reef and other ecosystems.