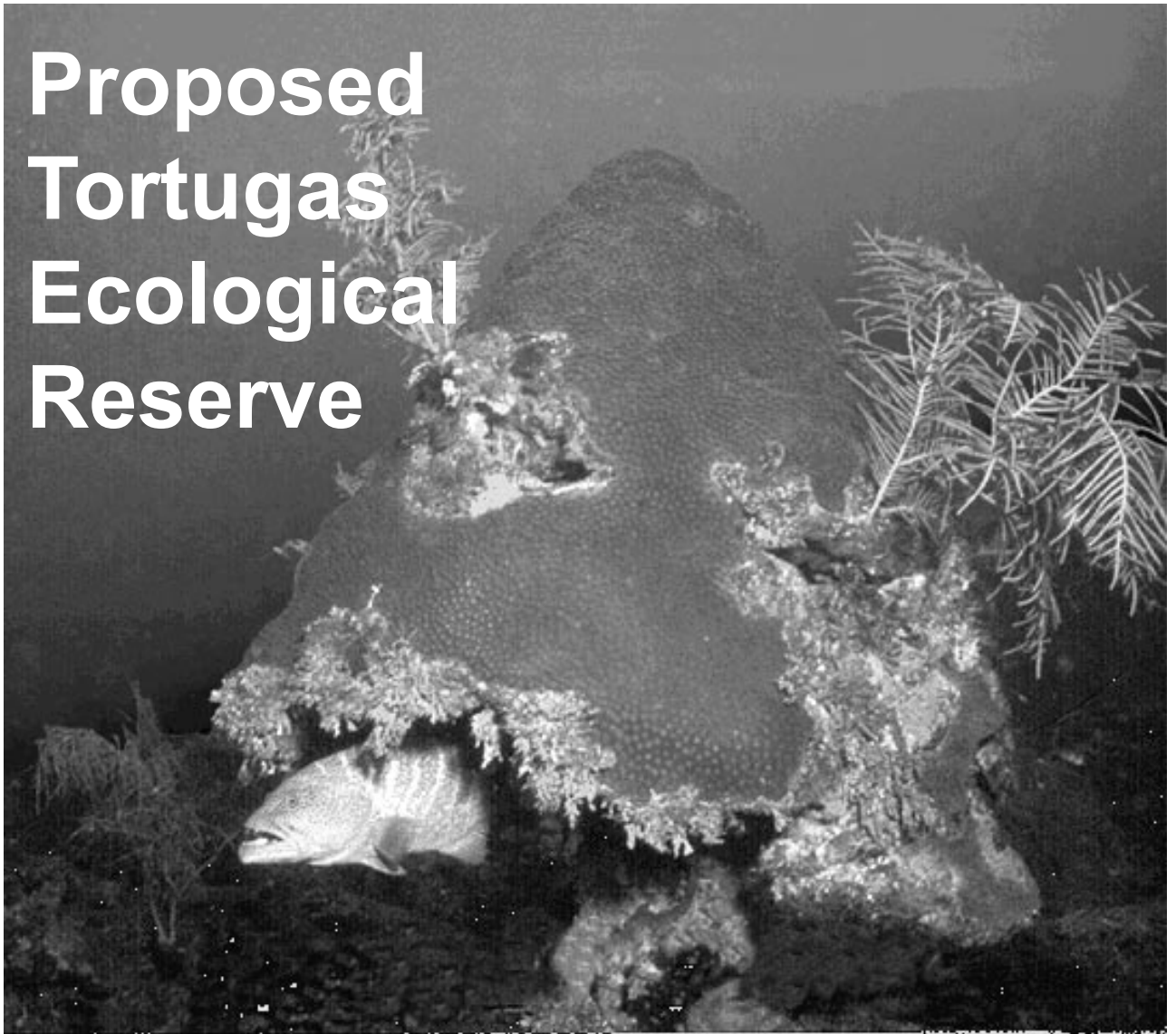


Proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve



U.S. Department of Commerce

National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Administration

National Ocean Service

Office of Ocean and Coastal
Resource Management

Marine Sanctuaries Division



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS), working in cooperation with the State of Florida, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, and the National Marine Fisheries Service, proposes to establish a 151 square nautical mile “no-take” ecological reserve to protect the critical coral reef ecosystem of the Tortugas, a remote area in the western part of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The reserve would consist of two sections, Tortugas North and Tortugas South, and would require an expansion of Sanctuary boundaries to protect important coral reef resources in the areas of Sherwood Forest and Riley’s Hump.

An ecological reserve in the Tortugas will preserve the richness of species and health of fish stocks in the Tortugas and throughout the Florida Keys, helping to ensure the stability of commercial and recreational fisheries. The reserve will protect important spawning areas for snapper and grouper, as well as valuable deepwater habitat for other commercial species. Restrictions on vessel discharge and anchoring will protect water quality and habitat complexity. The proposed reserve’s geographical isolation will help scientists distinguish between natural and human-caused changes to the coral reef environment.

Protecting Ocean Wilderness

Creating an ecological reserve in the Tortugas will protect some of the most productive and unique marine resources of the Sanctuary. Because of its remote location 70 miles west of Key West and more than 140 miles from mainland Florida, the Tortugas region has the best water quality in the Sanctuary. Healthy baitfish populations support thriving seabird communities, including sooty and noddy terns, masked boobies and the only roosting population of magnificent frigate birds in the continental U.S. Due to its location at the juncture of several major ocean currents, the Tortugas has a high potential for exporting the larvae of fish, lobster, and other marine organisms downstream to the Keys and the east coast of Florida.

The Tortugas reefs also boast the healthiest coral in the region. In the area dubbed “Sherwood Forest,” coral cover often exceeds 30%, compared to an average of 10% elsewhere in the Florida Keys. The well-developed reef forms a false bottom, interspersed with gorgonian-forests, sponges, and black corals. Scientists examining one bizarre, mushroom-shaped coral, characteristic of Sherwood Forest, found it to be approximately 400 years old. Other areas contain high relief pinnacles that protrude like

While no-take areas are a relatively new concept in the United States, resource managers worldwide have used them successfully to protect species diversity, replenish fish populations, and provide opportunities for education and research. Reserves provide protection to species not covered by traditional commercial and recreational fishing regulations. They protect habitat and food that fish and other creatures need to survive.

In 1997, the Sanctuary implemented a groundbreaking marine zoning plan featuring a network of 23 no-take areas that protect much of the critical shallow reef habit. However, the Sanctuary delayed implementation of the ecological reserve proposed for the Tortugas in response to public comments indicating that the proposed boundaries did not include the most significant coral reef resources and would cause serious economic harm to commercial fishermen. Instead, the Sanctuary's final management plan called for a collaborative initiative bringing together all stakeholders to draft boundaries for the Tortugas reserve.

A Collaborative Process to Design the Tortugas Ecological Reserve

To develop a preferred alternative for the reserve, the Sanctuary convened a 25-member Working Group composed of commercial and recreational fishers, divers, conservationists, scientists, concerned citizens, and government agencies. The Working Group used the best available information to develop a range of alternatives and recommend a preferred alternative to the State of Florida and Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC). The Working Group used an "ecosystem approach," recommending alternatives based on natural resources rather than jurisdictional boundaries.

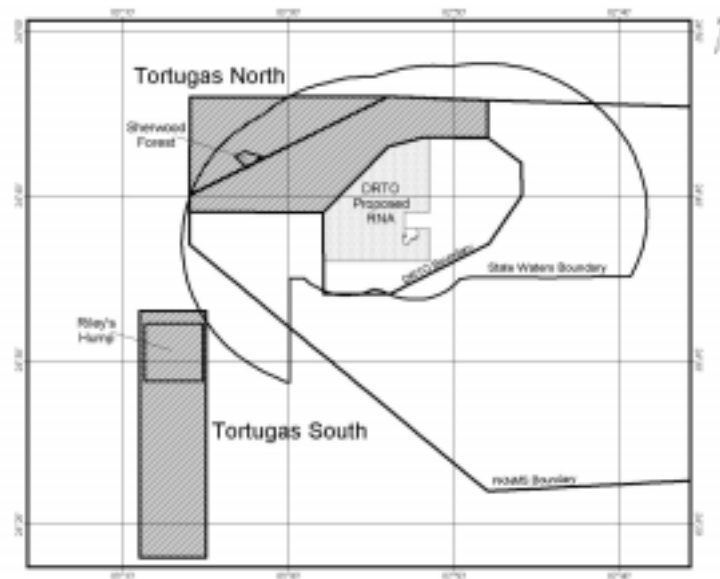
The Working Group gathered ecological and socioeconomic information through two forums, a site characterization document, and the firsthand experiences of commercial and recreational fishermen and others. The Sanctuary also held a series of public scoping meetings throughout South Florida in the fall of 1998 to gather input. In May 1999, the Working Group reached a consensus on proposed boundaries and regulations for the reserve. In June 1999, the Sanctuary Advisory Council unanimously approved their proposal.

The Tortugas Ecological Reserve Proposal

The preferred alternative for the Tortugas Ecological Reserve, contained in a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (DSEIS), would expand the boundary of the Sanctuary by approximately 96 square nautical miles to include two significant coral reef areas known as Sherwood Forest and Riley's Hump and establish a Tortugas

Ecological Reserve of approximately 151 square nautical miles in two sections. The area of the proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve surrounding Sherwood Forest would encompass approximately 91 square nautical miles and would be called Tortugas North; the area surrounding Riley's Hump would encompass approximately 60 square nautical miles and would be called Tortugas South. This alternative would expand the boundary of the Sanctuary in its northwesternmost corner by approximately 36 square nautical miles to include Sherwood Forest and would expand the boundary in the south by adding a noncontiguous area of approximately 60 square nautical miles to include Riley's Hump. The Tortugas North section would incorporate approximately 55 square nautical miles of the existing Sanctuary.

The preferred regulatory alternative contained in the DSEIS would apply existing Sanctuary-wide and existing ecological reserve regulations to Tortugas North and South; prohibit anchoring in, prohibit mooring by vessels more than 100 ft in length overall, and control access to Tortugas North and South via permit.



In addition, a simple, no-cost permit system would govern access to both Tortugas North and Tortugas South. By issuing permits, the Sanctuary can ensure that all vessels visiting the reserve have access to mooring buoys. The system will ease the task of enforcement in this remote region by providing officers with a list of vessels with permits to moor in the reserve. Vessels would be required to call in upon entering and leaving the reserve.

NOAA believes that this preferred alternative would adequately protect the nationally significant coral reef resources of the Tortugas region and fulfill the objectives of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Protection Act (FKNMSPA) and the National Marine Sanctuaries Act (NMSA). The preferred alternative is of sufficient size and imposes adequate protection measures to achieve the goals and objectives of the FKNMSPA and the NMSA while not unduly impacting user groups. While the Working Group and Sanctuary Advisory Council recommended applying the existing ecological reserve regulations, NOAA believes that the more protective approach of the preferred alternative is warranted because of the threat to coral reef resources posed by the anchoring of vessels and the difficulty of enforcing regulations in this remote area, particularly Tortugas South. Coral cover is so high and water depths so deep in the Tortugas that anchoring without damaging coral is virtually impossible. Enforcement would be greatly facilitated by the notice of user presence that would be provided to the FKNMS by the permit requirement.

Socioeconomic Impacts

As required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), the FKNMS has evaluated the environmental and socioeconomic consequences of the boundary and regulatory alternatives proposed for the Tortugas Ecological Reserve. Ecologically, the reserve would provide significant protection of coral reef resources, deepwater fish habitats, and known fish spawning areas.

Socioeconomic impacts, determined by analyzing the costs and benefits of no-take regulations on various industries, indicate moderate impacts on fishermen, mostly lobster and handline fishermen, and minimal impacts on recreational fishermen, commercial shippers, and treasure salvors. The potential for benefits to nonconsumptive users and the scientific community is high due to the educational and research value of an ecological reserve. Positive effects to surrounding areas through long-term fisheries replenishment are also likely.

Commenting on the Proposal

The Sanctuary encourages the public to comment on the alternatives contained in the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (DSEIS). Comments will be accepted until July 31, 2000 and may be submitted in writing to Mr. Billy Causey, Sanctuary Superintendent, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, P. O. Box 500368, Marathon, FL 33050 or by facsimile to (305) 743-2357. For more information or to

obtain a copy of the DSEIS call (305) 743-2437. Copies of the DSEIS may be obtained on the Internet at <http://www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov/tortugas>.

The Sanctuary will hold a series of public hearings throughout South Florida to accept comments on the DSEIS in conjunction with the National Park Service/Dry Tortugas National Park, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. Meeting dates, locations, and times are listed below. Presentations on the Tortugas Ecological Reserve proposal and the Dry Tortugas National Park General Management Plan revisions will occur at 3:30 p.m. and again at 6:00 p.m. at all Florida meetings, and at 2:30 p.m. at the Washington, DC meeting.

June 12, 2000	Homestead Senior High School SE 12 th Avenue Homestead, FL Main Cafeteria	3:00 – 8:00 p.m.
June 13, 2000	Comfort Inn Executive Suites 3860 Toll Gate Blvd. Naples, FL 2nd Floor Conference Room (941) 353-9500	3:00 – 8:00 p.m.
June 14, 2000	University of South Florida Campus Activities Center 2 nd Street and 6 th Avenue South St. Petersburg, FL CAC Central Room (727) 553-1598	3:00 – 8:00 p.m.
June 21, 2000	The Sombrero Country Club 4000 Sombrero Blvd. Marathon, FL Nautilus Room (305) 743-2551	3:00 – 8:00 p.m.
June 22, 2000	Holiday Inn Beachside 3841 N. Roosevelt Blvd.	3:00 – 8:00 p.m.

Executive Summary for the proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve
in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

Key West, FL
Main Ballroom
(305) 294-2571

July 11, 2000 U.S. Commerce Bldg. 2:00 – 5:00 p.m.
First Floor HCHB Auditorium
Washington, DC

After the public comment period closes, the Sanctuary will evaluate comments and respond to them in a Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement. The Sanctuary then will publish final regulations implementing the reserve.

The marine resources of the Tortugas are the crown jewel of the Florida Keys and represent one of America's last wild ocean places. NOAA believes that the proposed ecological reserve would ensure that the beautiful coral communities and other marine habitats of the Tortugas would be protected in perpetuity for this and future generations. NOAA encourages public participation and comments regarding this proposed action.