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NOAA Releases Report on the State of Deep Coral Ecosystems in the U.S. *Report Highlights U.S. Progress Conserving these Ecosystems*

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration today released a new report, *The State of Deep Coral Ecosystems of the United States*, called for in the President's Ocean Action Plan. The peer-reviewed report, prepared by NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program, provides a baseline for future research and management of these unique and vulnerable ecosystems.

"The United States has become a world leader in conservation efforts for deep sea corals," said Dr. Bill Hogarth, NOAA Fisheries Service Director. "Deep sea corals are not only beautiful; they are fragile living ecosystems that are critically important to the survival of many living creatures in our oceans. This report is another tool that scientists and managers can use to help stop their destruction and to develop new ways of helping them recover and survive."

The report comes on the eve of the declaration of 2008 as the International Year of the Reef, a worldwide campaign to raise public awareness about the value and importance of coral reefs and threats to their sustainability.

The report provides an up-to-date look at deep coral ecosystems in U.S. waters, including the biology of deep corals and their associated species, their spatial distribution, the stressors that may threaten their survival, current management measures, and regional priorities for future research. Many deep corals, also known as "deep-sea" or "cold-water" corals, form complex and biologically rich habitats in deeper waters off the U.S. and elsewhere around the world.

Because deep corals are long-lived, slow growing and fragile, they are vulnerable to human activities that damage the seafloor or alter the surrounding environment. Recovery from damage may take decades to centuries. Bottom trawling when it occurs in areas where fragile coral exist can be a threat to the habitat. Coral can also be damaged by other types of fishing gear, ocean acidification, and especially in the Gulf of Mexico, oil and gas exploration and development. This vulnerability has prompted increased calls for protection of deep coral habitats in the U.S. and around the world.

The report documents several recent management actions that have been taken by NOAA, other federal partners and regional fishery management councils to protect deep coral habitats, such as the closure of large areas of the seafloor to bottom trawling in U.S. waters. In 2006, NOAA, in partnership with the North Pacific and Pacific Fishery Management Councils, protected more than one-half million square miles of the seafloor, including unique deep coral habitats, from damage by trawling. These historic protections include the conservation of deep coral habitats as a component of ecosystem approaches to managing our nation's living ocean resources.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-479) calls on NOAA to develop a Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program, and provides new authorities to facilitate management efforts. NOAA works with the

regional fishery management councils, other federal partners, academia, environmental and fishing communities and other stakeholders to understand these unique ecosystems and protect them.

Scientists are learning how important deep coral habitats are to the survival of fish and other creatures in the ocean. The report shows that these habitats, found at depths ranging from 50 meters to more than 3,000 meters, may be much more extensive and important to ocean ecosystems than previously known. For example, in the Atlantic, corals range from canyons and seamounts with multicolored seafan corals in the Northeast to complex reef-like stony coral structures on the continental shelf and slope in the Southeast U.S. and Gulf of Mexico. In the U.S. Pacific, the continental slopes are alive with thickets of seafans and black corals, including exceptionally rich coral gardens in the Aleutian Islands. In Hawaii, precious corals provide foraging habitat for endangered monk seals.

“In most areas, additional mapping and research is needed,” Hogarth added. “This helps identify the location of deep coral habitats, which in the long run helps scientists and managers better understand and conserve these unique resources.”

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and more than 70 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

Deep Coral Report: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/dce.html

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