

## Navassa Island Coral Reef Task Force Public Comment

Navassa Island is a small, unincorporated possession of the United States in the Caribbean Sea, located 35 nautical miles (NM) west of Haiti, 60 NM east of Jamaica and 94 NM south of Cuba. Due to its ecological and biological importance, the island itself, and the surrounding submerged lands and water out to the 12 NM Territorial Sea Boundary is designated as a National Wildlife Refuge and is closed to public entry by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The Caribbean Fishery Management Council intends to commence preparation of a fishery management plan for the territorial waters in 2008.

Navassa Island boasts unique biodiversity and species richness not found elsewhere in the US Caribbean. Often referred to as the “Galapagos of the Caribbean,” Navassa contains more than 650 terrestrial organisms, including rare and endemic species, some of which were formerly thought to be extinct. The island is also home to several species of seabirds, including a nesting colony of several hundred red-footed boobies, one hundred frigatebirds, brown boobies and tropicbirds. The island’s marine environment hosts endangered loggerhead and critically endangered hawksbill sea turtles, several species of pelagic and reef fish, and diverse and ecologically important coral assemblages, including the threatened elkhorn and staghorn corals.

According to NOAA researchers, overfishing by Haitian commercial and subsistence fishers is the primary human threat to the island’s coral ecosystems. A recent increase in illegal fishing has been documented at Navassa, and qualitative observations suggest a rapid depletion of fishery resources. Fishermen have been removing most of the large fish, and their non-selective practices result in coral, sea turtle, crab, sponge, and seabird bycatch. In addition to potential marine ecosystem destruction, Navassa Island’s terrestrial habitat is threatened by invasive species, habitat modification and destruction from fires set on the island by trespassers. There is no FWS staff on the island, no regular patrols of refuge waters, and the Coast Guard does not have records of any over flights or vessel visits to Navassa during the last 6 years.

Marine Conservation Biology Institute would like to call for a meeting of federal stakeholders to discuss threats and emerging opportunities for management on Navassa Island. MCBI would be more than happy to host this in May, and we would look forward to facilitating efforts to better deal with these threats. Departments of the Interior and Commerce as well as US Coast Guard are the natural participants, but inclusion of all interested federal stakeholders would be encouraged.